



Supporting Economic Mobility through Toronto's Employment and Training System

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About Toronto Workforce Innovation Group

Toronto Workforce Innovation Group is Toronto's Workforce Planning Board. We conduct research, disseminate information and convene stakeholders to address workforce development trends, gaps and opportunities. Among similar organizations in Toronto, our multi-stakeholder approach is unique; we work on issues across many sectors and engage stakeholders from a wide range of perspectives. Our research is an on-going and continuous process that includes our numerous consultations and focus groups with employment/training service providers and job seekers in addition to the deep data dive that informs this report. TWIG achieves its mandate through:

- Researching, analyzing and reporting on workforce development trends, gaps and opportunities in Toronto.
- Acting as a resource to inform our stakeholders (community groups, educators and trainers, employers, governments, labour groups and media) about Toronto's workforce development issues.

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Introduction

Toronto’s challenge of stagnant economic mobility, increasing inequality of wealth, and the rise of low wage jobs is well documented. For lower-skilled job seekers and the working poor, these trends indicate that the ability to move forward and upward economically may not only be diminished, it is increasing blocked.

Globalization, the decline of manufacturing and disruptive technology has greatly accelerated two long-term challenges facing lower-skilled and low wage workers in the City of Toronto¹. The first challenge is that finding decent paying employment is increasingly out of reach for job seekers who lack education and skills beyond high-school. The second challenge, even if a job is obtained; there is a considerable lack of opportunity for occupational progression and positive wage trajectories available in Toronto’s emerging economy. This applies to young and old workers alike and to all skill levels – but is particularly acute for low-skilled workers with weak social networks, a group with declining labour force participation rates and who are far more likely to rely on some form of income support.

Toronto’s workforce development system can act as one of the key levers towards overcoming these challenges. With hundreds of agencies, institutions and points of service in adult employment and training, we have a system that is remarkably diverse and able to touch upon all of Toronto’s neighbourhoods. However, the reality is that our system, with its emphasis on “work-first” and “rapid re-employment” policies and ensuing approaches may be out of date and not entirely aligned to the increasingly complex economic realities facing many Torontonians.

So, while many types of employment programs are available in Toronto for those who are in need of finding a job, few programs are explicitly designed to support those who have finally gained a foothold in the labour market, to advance to better occupations and higher wages. While many employment counsellors help former clients to retain employment and/or look for occupational

Some supports for low-wage workers exist in the province; however these programs are not systematically or purposefully designed to address the issue of wage stagnation.

progression, this support is often ad hoc or done off the side of their desk. Some supports for low-wage workers exist in the province; however these programs are not systematically or purposefully designed to address the issue of wage stagnation.

Across North America and in other OECD countries, two emergent workforce development approaches are showing significant promise in the effort to support low wage and low skilled workers in obtaining and progressing in the labour market. These two approaches are:

- **Sector Strategies:** An approach that targets a specific industry or a cluster of occupations in the labour market. A workforce program, or a group of programs, marshal their resources to develop a deep understanding of industry dynamics and the workforce needs of the industry's employers and workers within a region.
- **Post-Employment Strategies:** An approach that recognizes support to a low skilled job seeker to get a job is just the first step on a long journey. These innovative employment programs emphasize additional guidance to help participants adapt to their jobs, address personal or situational problems that could undermine steady work, identify opportunities for workers to move up, and in some cases assist them to pursue further education or training.

While there are numerous versions of these strategies, this paper takes a more detailed look at the *WorkAdvance* model from New York City that is being replicated in a number of jurisdictions. *WorkAdvance* is of interest because it combines both sectoral and post-employment strategies. Early results from *WorkAdvance* shows the model is making some progress towards breaking the vicious cycle of low-wage work for populations without post-secondary credentials or strong work histories.

This paper seeks to answer a number of important questions. Could a new type of employment program, one that combines a sectoral approach with intensive post-employment supports, support economic opportunity for Toronto's low-skilled and low-waged workers? Is this type of program needed in Toronto? For what industry sectors might it be successful within? Finally, can the *WorkAdvance* model be adapted to our context and how can we capitalize on the expertise and skills already inherent within Toronto's employment and training system?

We hope this paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue among practitioners and policy makers in addressing a potential crisis in our labour market dynamics. Only through the concentrated and collaborative efforts of our workforce development system, can we make real and tangible progress towards supporting those workers being left behind in Toronto's new economy.

Supporting Economic Mobility through Toronto's Employment and Training Systems

I. The Seemingly Intractable Challenge of Low-Wage Work

Most economic indicators suggest Toronto is experiencing steady economic growth. That is positive news for our city, province and country. Yet, beyond the headline numbers, it has become increasingly clear that that Toronto's economic success has not translated into economic opportunity and mobility for all workers. Clearly, there has been a shift in the labour market, one that puts a premium on skills, post-secondary credentials and Canadian work experience. Indeed, agencies supporting job-seekers across the city, deal with this problem every day.

And too often, when dealing with job seekers, Employment Ontario service providersⁱⁱ are faced with the daily conundrum of deciding whether to encourage job seekers without post-secondary credentials or strong work histories towards minimum wage employment or whether to extend a job search process in the uncertain hope of finding a higher paying job with some level of opportunity. This is a difficult decision when working clients with who are in need of securing immediate income in order to support themselves and their family. And this is a problem of no small magnitude when it comes to the City of Toronto. It is currently estimated that close to 9% of all workers in the city of Toronto work for the minimum wage. Nor is this just about youth as over 40% of minimum wage workers are over the age of 25.ⁱⁱⁱ

The recent report from Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO), found that precarious employment has become common feature of the South Western Ontario labour market, where only half of working adults have permanent, full-time positions with benefits and some employment security^{iv}. Furthermore, the report highlighted the fact that many low wage and precarious workers are recent immigrants and youth. The recent TWIG paper, *Ninety Five Months Later*, cast additional light on the challenge. The paper interrogated Toronto Labour Force Survey (LFS) data over a time period of nearly eight years. The data documented the positive correlations between educational attainment, employment rates and earning trajectories. *Ninety Five Months Later* found that working age Torontonians, both male and female, whose education is high school or less; face a very bleak Toronto labour market with declining wages and hours of work.^v Another report, by the Mowat Centre, noted that in Toronto's emerging economy, getting a job is only part of the labour market challenge, as the prevalence of precarious employment means that economic and social returns to employment are lower than expected. Even if youth, new immigrants, and lower skilled individuals are able to land a position, that position may be insecure, of short-duration, and without benefits, all of which limits career progression.^{vi}

Of course, Toronto is not alone in facing the seemingly intractable problem of low-skilled and low-wage work. Studies of other large cities in North America suggest that as these cities shifted from a manufacturing-based economy to an economy rooted in health services, finances, and technology; significant growth in the economy and wages continued. For the most part, these high skilled industries offer the kind of occupations that provide workers with decent salaries and opportunities for advancement. However, the economic prosperity offered via these sectors has not been evenly spread across all populations and communities.

The reality is that the kind of security formerly offered by manufacturing to those without post-secondary education has largely disappeared from the Toronto economic landscape. In turn, many of these workers (and future workers) have had to look towards lower paying and less stable employment in the retail and service sector. Thus, many Toronto residents, most notably those who are in poor neighbourhoods or are less educated, are not benefitting from new economic activity.

...we need next-generation employment and training strategies for increasing the economic self-sufficiency of low-income individuals and families.

Our employment and training system, largely designed for different economic times^{vii} and created in the context of “work-first” policies, remains out of synch with Toronto’s new economy. Given this challenge,

it seems clear that we need *next-generation* employment and training strategies for increasing the economic self-sufficiency of low-income individuals and families.

WorkAdvance, a program developed by the New York Center for Economic Opportunity, is one such initiative. It was purposefully designed to address the changing circumstances faced by lower-skilled workers. The *WorkAdvance* model is demonstrating promising outcomes for low-wage workers and may provide some indication of how the City of Toronto can help low-income individuals gain, maintain and advance in employment.

Using a sector-focused approach to workforce development, *WorkAdvance* is specifically designed to help low-skill and low-wage working adults increase their employment and earnings over time. By focusing on a particular industry sector, *WorkAdvance* sites develop strong employer relationships and expertise in the career paths within the chosen sector and match potential job seeker attitudes, attributes, skills and training to sectoral occupations. The *WorkAdvance* model design was based on promising elements of sectoral, retention and advancement strategies being tested in various jurisdictions. The goal of *WorkAdvance* is to produce longer-lasting effects on employment, earnings, and career progression for at risk job-seekers and low-wage workers.^{viii}

Over the past four months, Toronto Workforce Innovation Group investigated the *WorkAdvance* model to determine if it could offer opportunities to the employment and training system in Toronto in an effort to provide economic mobility to working families. During this time, we conducted a literature review and analyzed numerous secondary sources. More importantly, we held numerous key informant interviews with program managers, employment counsellors and job developers from a variety of EO Employment Service providers in Toronto. We wanted to know:

- If employment service providers felt that low-wage work is a problem for their clients and communities.
- If employment service providers were receptive to models like *WorkAdvance* that provide intensive post-employment supports?
- From the perspective of a service provider, does the concept of *WorkAdvance* makes sense within their community’s context? What would the barriers be?
- Are there industry sectors that might be receptive towards this type of model?
- Do employment service providers have the capacity to adopt this type of model?
- What programming and service modifications would have to occur to adopt this approach? What additional resources would be required?

- How should we test a model that featured intensive post-employment supports in Toronto? How would we know if it was successful?

II. A Brief History of Job Search Assistance Programs

In most Canadian provinces and in other OECD countries, workforce development programs have become a key lever in supporting job-seekers, workers, employers and economic development. Government funded workforce development programs are seen as a necessity to improve labour market efficiency, increase human capital, enhance the competitiveness of local industry and ensure social and economic mobility among citizens. Increasingly, workforce development programs are also intended to address the challenges of those groups who are under-represented in the labour market.

Workforce development programs include interventions such as job search centres, skills training and education initiatives for the unemployed or underemployed, and job subsidies or incentives to create jobs for the unemployed. These programs have traditionally fallen within three general categories:

Workforce Development Program	Examples	Intended Effects
Job Search and Employment Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job search assistance (resumes, interview skills and networking). • Online job boards. • Job development and matching. • Career exploration and assessment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase job matching quality. • Improve job search efficiency.
Skills Training and Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy, Upgrading and GED • Second Language Programs • Skills training (short and long-term). • Apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase human capital. • Increase productivity. • Decrease long-term unemployment.
Job Creation Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wage subsidies. • Direct job creation and hiring incentives. • Self-employment support • Supported employment (rehabilitation and accommodation). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased inflow into employment. • Increase labour market attachment. • Reduction in recruitment and retention costs.

All three types of workforce development programs have been in use in both Toronto and Ontario for decades. The mix of these programs has varied over the years – with the balance of the various types determined largely by the economy or provincial labour market policy. Indeed, two policy frameworks for conceptualizing workforce development policy have battled for dominance over the last twenty-five years: the “work-first” approach (job search) and the “human capital” approach (skills training)^{ix}.

Work first approaches seek to improve the “employability” of unemployed individuals through rapid transition to work through short term job matching services. These models typically provide pre-employment services that target readily available jobs and provide little, if any, education and training. Evidence from several large scale American studies from the 1990’s, indicated that while traditional job placement programs initially increase employment rates, in the long run they are often unable to move low-skilled individuals out of low-income and precarious employment opportunities. These studies have led many to conclude that ‘work-first’ strategies offer little to recipients facing difficulties finding or keeping a job.^x

Work-first approaches are normally associated with robust economic conditions and social assistance reform. They are also inexorably linked to changes in labour market policies such as the reduction of income benefits or mandatory activities for recipients. Human capital_(or skill-building) approaches often gain predominance during times of weak economic growth and have roots in the idea that providing citizens with opportunities to develop their skills across the course of their careers and is critical for both individual and regional economic security. The current provincial and federal dialogue over the nature and depth of the perceived skills gap – the gap between the skills profile of Ontario/Toronto’s labour supply and the demands of employers – reflects this perspective. Currently, in both Toronto and the rest of the province, job search programs and supports dominate the landscape of workforce development services.

The prevalence of work-first approaches in our labour market can be traced back to the results from two major and robust evaluations of workforce development programs in the 1990’s. At that time, skills training initiatives were more common than job-search support or rapid re-employment initiatives. However, Abt and Associates’ 1993 assessment of the Job Training Partnership Act caused many policy makers to reconsider the allocation of public funds towards skills training initiatives. This landmark randomized-control trial found (at-best) minimal positive impacts for participants. Furthermore, the analysis determined that the program was neither cost-effective, and for a number of unemployed populations, actually produced negative results. The following year, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation’s (MDRC) assessment of California’s Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) Program found strong positive results and significant return on investment for an approach that placed emphasis on rapid re-employment and job-search assistance.

Common wisdom among policy makers in the late 1990’s was that measures for increasing human capital was a poor investment while job search supports provided positive impact.

Common wisdom among policy makers in the late 1990’s was that measures for increasing human capital was a poor investment while job search supports provided positive impact. Indeed, the inherent work-first approach behind both EO Employment Services and

Ontario Works can be traced back to evidence from these two studies. For the most part, job

search and job matching appear to be the most cost-effective intervention in overcoming frictional obstacles to employment, and reducing unemployment intervals. Additionally, job search programs seem to be the most effective approach for more skilled job seekers and for those with some form of post-secondary education.

More recent reviews and studies are taking a longer look at the impacts of programs centred on job search and job matching activities. While they can produce positive (and sometimes significant) effects on participant employment rates and the length of unemployment, the effectiveness of this approach is concentrated on fairly immediate outcomes and is not usually sustained over longer time intervals. Moreover, the effects of job search assistance are minimal for more marginalized job seekers and have little impact on future earnings or unemployment intervals. Meanwhile, the positive benefits of skills training or human capital measures may take up to five years to materialize.

Given the evidence, several common lines of inquiry run throughout recent workforce development literature; how can job search and job matching programs be made more effective for job seekers more distant from the labour market? How can we get more immediate returns from skills training initiatives? Currently, emergent thinking suggests the answers may well lay in “sectoral” and “hybrid” approaches.

III. The Promise of Sectoral and Hybrid Approaches

The current EO Employment Service model offers a highly adaptable toolkit of services that is customizable to any individual’s needs. The model was designed to provide Ontarians, wherever they live, with a full suite of services to support job seekers. This model works well, in that it can be situated in any location throughout the province and is able to serve a wide range of clients. Yet, despite its track record of success, the current employment service model may have some limitations. First, the model (on paper) is fairly generic and lacks the high degree of specialization that is often required to address the needs of specific populations.^{xi} Second, the service model takes a generalist approach to “employers” instead of being focused on a particular industry within a region.

Sector Approaches

In order to gain a better understanding of local supply and demand issues related to local labour markets, there has been a clear and distinct movement in other jurisdictions towards sector based approaches. This approach is seen as a positive step towards preparing unemployed and under-skilled workers for skilled positions and as a way to connect them with employers seeking to fill vacancies. Studies have found that participants in sectoral programs were substantially more likely to find employment, work more consistently, and work in jobs that paid higher wages.^{xii}

Sector approaches are designed to fit the needs of both industry and workers who want to improve their skills and advance their career development. By definition, sector-based approaches target a specific industry that has some evidence of growth in a region – and have the potential to provide routes to positive wage trajectories for more marginalized job seekers and low wage workers.

Sector strategies are typically created through networks and partnerships. These partnerships are intended to connect low-income or disadvantaged individuals with employment in jobs that offer the promise of financial stability and significant growth in the near future. Employment agencies can play an important role in building and supporting a sector-based strategy. The involvement of an intermediary (such as a specialized job search centre) with deep knowledge of the industry is a pre-requisite. This intermediary can facilitate partnerships with employers, and help create solutions for both employers and potential employees.

Applying a sectoral approach to EO Employment Services may not be suitable for all areas of the province, particularly where there are few employment service providers. However, in Toronto, the country's largest city, a shift to a sector approach has the potential to transform the current state of service delivery. There are close to fifty Employment Ontario service providers with over sixty points of services across Toronto. In addition, there are 20 Toronto Employment and Social Service (TESS) Employment Centres and other numerous job search agencies (other than Employment Ontario) that service hundreds of thousands of job seekers each year.

Given the breadth of services supporting job search and job development across Toronto, there may be opportunity for some service centers to specialize in specific industry sectors. Allowing for specialization would allow some service providers to have a more narrow focus, and develop the expertise, knowledge and relationships to more effectively address specific industry needs. Sector focused programming might have the ability to provide job seekers and employers a more focused set of options, which are more rigorous in terms of employment and career opportunities in a particular sector. Evidence from elsewhere suggests this approach can bridge labour market supply and demand issues by moving clients to in-demand jobs and helping employers with their specific hiring goals.

Adopting a sector focus that features career advancement services may also present opportunities for service providers to provide stronger industry insights to their “assisted” service components. This includes job search, job matching, placement and incentive, as well as job training and retention services. Having the ability to deeply engage industry lets service providers develop a highly enriched understanding of sector nuances, such as, organizational structures, occupational/skills requirements, recruitment, selection and advancement practices, specific organizational requirements and emerging sector trends. This detailed understanding helps service providers to develop the types of insights needed to tailor assisted service components so that they are more reflective of the hiring practices of each sector. Furthermore, employment service

plans, job search, job placement and training can become more aligned to emerging sector/occupational requirements and opportunities.

A sector approach can also enhance existing employment retention services that focus on participants long-term career advancement planning and goal setting. This long-term approach could change the perspective of employment services towards clients with lower skills. In this manner, employment services can build off of entry-level staffing placements to a sector talent development pipeline. A sector lens not only has the ability to enhance “assisted” service components, it also could alter the nature of client service planning and coordination, as well as resource and information services.

Finally, sector specialization gives service providers a better understanding of where clients stand in relation to employment readiness and required services that can aid them in securing a promising future in the selected sector. In addition, service providers in a sector model can mix “work-first” and “human capital development” linked through the common denominator of an industry sector. This mix of workforce programming is often described as integrated or “hybrid” programming.

Hybrid Approaches

The paradigm of competing approaches (work first and human capital) and the demarcation in service delivery between these approaches is eroding and a new generation of hybrid models is emerging. These emergent models break down traditional silos and bridge the divide between work-first and human capital approaches to blend adult learning with more clearly defined and immediate employment opportunities.^{xiii} According to Holzer, these approaches generally involve a combination of the following: (1) education and training to give workers some form of credential; (2) direct ties to employers or industries that provide well-paying jobs in key sectors; and (3) a range of additional supports and services to help workers deal with problems that arise during training.^{xiv} These models sometimes judiciously use incentives or subsidies for employers for participants who otherwise were unlikely to have been hired.^{xv}

Hybrid models feature an additional characteristic; post-employment support for clients. Programs such as Pathways to Healthcare Program (Pima Community College), the Workforce Training Academy Connect (Des Moines Area Community College) and Hospitality Workers Training Centre (Toronto) offer formal and informal wrap-around supports including counselling, mentoring, childcare, transportation, and additional training when necessary. While these features are not necessarily “innovative” – the fact that they are continued or applied after a participant becomes employed is (for the most part) a new concept. Programs are not only responsible for helping clients find a job, but for keeping the job too.

Recently, many new initiatives and hybrid programs in Toronto have already arisen to respond to the challenges faced by low-skilled and low-wage workers. Many of these initiatives are adopting

promising practices and models from sectoral and work-based learning approaches from other jurisdictions.^{xvi} While these initiatives and/or programs are somewhat different than the *WorkAdvance* model, many feature common elements, similar practices and often focus their work on industry sectors. Two notable examples are Employment and Social Services (TESS) Purchase of Employment Services (POES) program and United Way Toronto & York Region's Career Navigator; both of which were launched in 2015.

TESS's POES's initiative is deliberately designed to better serve clients distant from the labour market (Ontario Works recipients) and bring about innovation in how service providers deliver programs. While POES does not prescribe a specific model to service providers, it directs funding towards programming that targets short-term training in high-demand sectors with good jobs and career advancement opportunities.

Currently, POES is providing funding to 60 organizations across Toronto divided across four streams including Employment Essentials, Sector-Focused Career Development, Occupational-Specific Skill Training, and Self-Employment Development. POES is unique in that it is a pay-for-performance model, where providers only receive funding for participants who complete the training. They also receive performance bonuses for every month a participant is employed, up to one year after training. While not explicitly defined, this additional funding encourages providers to support participants with some form of post program employment support. As POES was only launched in 2015, there is no available evidence on the outcomes and/or detailed information on how service providers are delivering their programs.

United Way Toronto & York Region's Career Navigator™ was specifically designed for unemployed youth that face multiple barriers. The initiative is an education-to-employment pipeline that combines industry recognized training and social supports to help youth secure credentials and experiences needed for in-demand jobs. The Career Navigator™ model includes soft skill development; educational or vocational training that lead to industry-recognized credentials; paid work placement and wrap around supports that include pre and post- employment services.

The Career Navigator program provides funding to a wide range of community based organizations. This includes NPower Canada and Hospitality Workers Training Centre (HWTC) that have replicated, adapted and applied American sectoral training models to the Toronto context, as well as, other providers who are new or have some familiarity with this type of delivery.^{xvii} Both NPower and HWTC offer programs similar to *WorkAdvance* in that they are hybrid models, are sector focused, and provide industry recognized credentials.

Clearly, some movement towards sector and hybrid approaches currently exists within the Toronto context. While these efforts are a positive sign, it should be noted that these initiatives are not organized in a systematic process. Moving forward, it is important that we learn from these initiatives and develop a better understanding of what practices and factors influence the outcomes and effectiveness of these new initiatives.

IV. Combining Hybrid and Sector Approaches: The *WorkAdvance* Model

Originally launched in 2009 under the name Advance at Work by the NYC Centre for Economic Opportunity, the model achieved early success when compared to other workforce interventions. It was able to demonstrate higher rates of placement, hourly wages and weekly hours worked.^{xviii} Based on two decades worth of rigorous evidence from welfare-to-work workforce development

The model reflected the assumption that the inclusion of a focus on long-term career advancement could produce positive earnings trajectories for low-wage and low-skilled workers.

programs, Advance at Work was designed to improve outcomes for low-income individuals.^{xix}

The program came out of a belief that traditional job support mechanisms and programs were not adequately addressing the challenges faced by disconnected low-income workers. The second generation

model of Advance at Work became *WorkAdvance*. The model reflected the assumption that the inclusion of a focus on long-term career advancement could produce positive earnings trajectories for low-wage and low-skilled workers.

The design of the model drew upon lessons from other successful sector based training approaches, as well as, the addition of retention and advancement strategies in order to produce longer lasting effect on employment, earnings and career trajectories. *WorkAdvance* is predicated on the notion that only through deep knowledge of and relationships with employers in a particular industry sector can programs provide the specialized services needed for participants to succeed in their jobs and advance in their careers, while also meeting employers' demand for specific skills.

According to the Aspen Institute, "To make significant headway in connecting low-income earners to better jobs, industry based programs find that it is best to adopt a broad systemic approach within a narrow occupational focus."^{xx} Sector strategies go well beyond simply providing training in an area of specialization. Sectoral initiatives need to bring together multiple employers to collaborate on developing a qualified workforce for in-demand occupations to improve low-income workers' opportunities for sustained employment and career mobility.^{xxi} Over the last two decades, rigorous evaluations have demonstrated that sector specific vocational training that prepares participants for jobs improve outcomes provided there are local labour market opportunities in those sectors.^{xxii}

WorkAdvance programs are currently operating in three American cities (New York City, Tulsa, and Greater Cleveland) with a focus on a number of industry sectors. Variations of the model are now being implemented in other states, the United Kingdom and Australia.^{xxiii} An independent and rigorous analysis of the *WorkAdvance* model is currently being conducted by MDRC. Interim

findings found that *WorkAdvance* participants were significantly more likely to be placed in jobs, earn more, and work more hours than those who received traditional job assistance services.^{xxiv} The final evaluation report is to be released in the summer of 2016.

V. The *WorkAdvance* Model

WorkAdvance is a hybrid model that has a number of iterations and has been applied to a variety of industry sectors. It is currently operating in four pilot sites and the sectors of focus include: Information Technology, Transportation and Logistics, and Advanced Manufacturing. Each *WorkAdvance* site is required to combine elements of pre-employment and career readiness services, occupational skills training, job development and placement, and postemployment retention and advancement services that are provided in a cohesive manner. The *WorkAdvance* model allows for local service providers to make a variety of implementation choices based on local needs and capacity. However, the following required elements of practice have been defined to promote effective service.^{xxv}

Intensive Screening and Appropriate Participant Selection:

- Identify and select participants who have the ability to complete the program, are appealing to employers, while at the same time, are not so qualified that they are likely to find similar jobs on their own.
- Recruit low-income participants who meet the eligibility criteria and have shown interest in working and/or establishing a career in the selected sector.

Sector-focused Pre-Employment and Career Readiness Preparation:

- Develop soft skills, prepare participants for the types of work environments in the sector, educate them about the kinds of credentials and career opportunities in the sector, as well as, set expectations about appropriate attitudes and behaviors to be successful in the sector
- Includes orientation to the sector, career readiness training, individualized career coaching, and financial assistance for employment and training related expenses (e.g. transportation subsidy, tools, uniforms, etc.), as well as, other social supports as needed.

Sector-Specific Occupational Skills Training:

- Provide sector specific skills training, which leads to credentials and skills that enhance participants' employment opportunities in the sector.
- Training is specifically geared for sectors specific occupations where there is an authentic labour market demand in the sector and potential for career advancement.
- Employers are engaged and consulted so that training aligns with sector demands.

Sector-Specific Job Development and Placement:

- Facilitate entry into positions in the sector where there are opportunities for skill development and career advancement.
- Job developers are expected to maintain strong relations with employers so placements are linked to the occupational training provided.

Postemployment Retention and Advancement Services:

- Work with participants to identify next-step job opportunities and skills training in order to help them to move up over time, and/or help with reemployment, if they lose their job.
- Provide ongoing counseling and case management after participants have been placed in employment.
- Helps participants retain, advance their jobs, and support them through various life issues.
- Maintain regular contact with workers and employers to assess performance and address issues that arise.

Throughout the entire duration of the program, providers are expected to establish and maintain strong relationships with employers. They are expected to have a clear understanding of employer organizational structures, occupational opportunities, skill requirements, and keep up-to-date on shifts in the industry and employer demands so that they can make adjustments to the program and satisfy emergent needs.

While all providers must offer some form of occupational skills training, some *WorkAdvance* providers chose to offer two separate streams for participants. One stream provides up-front occupational skills training, while the other focused on placement first. The “placement-first” option was intended to be a less expensive, streamlined route to advancement that provides participants with the opportunity to gain sector specific work experience without having to participate in formal training. According to MDRC, and through conversations with individual sites, another reason for a placement first stream was that it helped providers offer more immediate job ready candidates to employers.

What are the findings about WorkAdvance?

Evidence from the *WorkAdvance* demonstration project is primarily based on the evaluation report by MDRC covering the first 24 to 28 months of operations. The evaluation is utilizing a randomized control trial (RCT) to assess the program effects. While the data from the RCT is promising, at the time of the study not all of the providers had completed the job placement phase of the 12-month follow up. A second evaluation report by MDRC will contain additional information on program implementation and will provide both program and survey data that covers a longer time period. The second evaluation will include findings on impacts on employment, earnings, and program costs for 18 to 24 months after the randomized assignment.

Findings from WorkAdvance Pilot Sites

Some of the initial findings from the first evaluation on *WorkAdvance* include the following insights:^{xxvi}

Technical assistance: Initial findings from the first evaluation of *WorkAdvance* suggest that interpreting and implementing the model often takes time and requires some level of technical assistance.

- Providers were provided technical assistance from consultants (MDRC and NYC Centre for Economic Opportunities) to help with the implementation of all the model elements, particularly the career advancement component that was new to all providers.
- Technical assistance included materials, training, and conferences; observations and assessment of service delivery that identified strengths and areas for improvement.

Human Resource Capacity: The *WorkAdvance* model does not prescribe specific staffing structures, yet in order to be effectively operationalized, it is expected that certain staff functions be in place.

- Each *WorkAdvance* site had a program coordinator, who was responsible for the overall implementation of the program, while other staff members fulfilled different functions such as recruitment and screening, skills training, career readiness, job development, account management and career coaching.
- At most of the sites, employees from the provider organization mainly staffed functions, while other *WorkAdvance* providers contracted some functions to other agencies.
- All providers selected for *WorkAdvance* had previous experience running sectoral training programs or had operational sectoral training programs, and as such, they selected industries in which they had experience.

Recruitment: The *WorkAdvance* model has fairly clear recruitment guidelines in order to accumulate and screen a sufficient number of applicants who meet the basic eligibility criteria.

- MDRC documented that in the beginning of the recruitment process, all providers' were uncertain about the best methods for recruiting applicants, which may have contributed to low enrollment numbers in the early stages.
- As providers grew more accustomed to the program they adjusted their outreach strategies, adapted procedures and fine-tuned their screening processes to better appropriate participants.
- Providers received technical assistance on their messaging and focused first on the value of *WorkAdvance* before discussing documentation required for enrollment.
- Participants were attracted to the program because it offered the chance to have a career, provided free occupational skills training and earn an industry-recognized credential.

Selection: *WorkAdvance* deployed a rigorous screening process that takes at least two days long, and where applicants were asked to report to the provider on multiple occasions.

- Only 20% of potential participants ended up being eligible or qualified for the program. Based on the interim evaluation, many applicants dropped out in the intake process. Evidence suggests that many applicants chose to self-select themselves out rather than be screened out by the providers.
- MRDC noted that the rigorous screening process might have influenced the high rates of participation in program activities, as only those who met the criteria and were highly motivated made it through the selection process.

Participant Characteristics: Requires individuals to demonstrate an interest in the sector, as well as, the aptitude and ability to work in that sector. This often includes minimum educational requirements based on the sector requirements, a clean criminal record and/or driver's license, if necessary.

- Data from *WorkAdvance* found that most participants had at least a high school diploma or GED certificate; previous work experience and over half the sample had at least some college education; however at the time of intake only 20% were working. Participants from *WorkAdvance* sites tended to have higher levels of education than the United States national population.^{xxvii}
- Based on client characteristics data, it appears the sites targeted disadvantaged populations. Across all sites over 50% of the participants were African American, 36.9% were on food stamps, 24.2% were previously convicted of a crime and 16.2% were single caregivers.

Findings from *WorkAdvance* Career Readiness and Occupational Skills Training

With over 80% of participants completing the program, *WorkAdvance* has a very high completion rate compared to other interventions geared toward low-skilled, low-income job-seekers. All sites were provided with the flexibility to customize curriculum of both career readiness and occupational skills training to the particular sector.

Career Readiness: The career readiness component of *WorkAdvance* prepares participants with the employability skills to begin their initial placement and progress along career paths within the sector:

- Findings indicated there was substantial variation in the structure and delivery of the career readiness service component offered across service providers, however the content of the training was similar.
- While providers were expected to customize the content of the career readiness curriculum to the particular sector, feedback suggests that the classes covered general topics. This included

introduction to the sector, résumés and cover letters, job search, interview preparation, and development of individualized career plans (ICPs).

- Some providers placed emphasis on and often mimicked workplace norms such as dress code, punctuality, and general code of conduct.
- Feedback from participants, program providers and employers highlighted the importance of teaching soft skills training in career readiness classes. The skills developed appeared to be as important to participants and employers as the technical skills acquired from occupational skills training.
- Providers found a variety of ways to engage industry partners in career readiness activities. Some sites used employer advisory groups on curricula for career readiness classes as well as on occupational skills training, while others relied individual relationships with employers to gather feedback.^{xxviii} In some cases, *WorkAdvance* providers worked with employers to conduct mock interviews and hosted visits so that participants can get exposure to the workplace environments.

Occupational skills training: This *WorkAdvance* component was designed to help participants obtain industry-recognized credentials and technical skills that apply to local employers in targeted the sector.

- The design of the occupational training component is highly dependent on the industry sector, skills and certification required for the targeted positions. These requirements influenced the duration, content and delivery of the training. *WorkAdvance* occupational training varied widely – ranging from two weeks to eight months in duration. Furthermore, a wide range of variation existed in terms of the materials and certification requirements.
- Some of the sites conducted their training on-site with its own instructors; some programs conducted the training off-site with outside instructors, while one program offered a hybrid approach.
- All *WorkAdvance* providers offered training in cohorts with sizes that ranged from 15 to 20 participants. Training was full time and offered by all providers during regular business hours, however, two programs eventually decided to offer evening and part-time classes to accommodate participants who worked during the day.
- Participants often had to wait for the next cohort to fill up and some participants had wait up to several months before training began, depending on the program..
- Cohort-based training offered advantages in that it helped build group cohesiveness and encouraged relationships that supported training completion. Participants described the classroom as a family environment that provided motivation and considered the training, where they gained knowledge and technical skills to be one of the most valued elements of the program. Feedback highlighted the value of instructors’ industry experience, the content of the material, and hands on activities.
- All the providers made adjustments to their occupational skills training to better reflect trends in the broader labor market. This went from revising training curriculum to offering new types of training to meet emerging occupational demands. Programs were adapted based on

employer input, local labor market data, industry journals, industry association meetings, and feedback from employer advisory groups.

Findings from *WorkAdvance* Program Supports

Wrap Around Supports: Training and employment-related supports to support participants with financial barriers are provided throughout the duration of the program. Supports included licensing fees, tools, or uniforms and transportation assistance to get to training and work until the participant receives their first paycheck. Providers also offered other socio/psychological support services to help participants with program persistence and employment retention.

- While *WorkAdvance* offers many supports, some participants struggled to support themselves financially while engaged in longer training programs. To address this issue, some programs worked with local colleges and employers to compress training courses.
- Findings from case notes reveal that some participants did not complete training due to more immediate needs for income, inflexible work schedules, or behavioral or mental health setbacks. When these issues did arise, providers tried to address these challenges by deferring participants to subsequent cohorts or by helping them to find more immediate employment in the sector.
- The average dropout rate for participants was 12%, considered to be a very low rate for program that is designed for low-income and low-skilled populations.

Findings from *WorkAdvance* Participant Career Advancement Process

Career Advancement: This begins for all participants at program entry when they meet with a career coach to establish an individualized career plan (ICP). The ICP is a “living” document that supports the participant and career coach to set specific career goals and actions together that are tracked over time.

- Each ICP has sections on gaining entry-level employment in the targeted sector, steps to acquire additional skills, and advice about how to advance in their careers.
- Career coaches use a strengths-based advancement approach in which the focus is on the skills and qualities that participants have and can acquire to move up in their career, rather than focusing on barriers.
- Career readiness services were modified based on input from employers. Feedback from employers suggested that softer skills were critical when they made their hiring decisions. Many employers said that the challenges with participants were often more related to soft skills than technical skills.

VI. Feasibility of Implementing WorkAdvance Model: A Systems Perspective

From a systems perspective, there would appear to be some merit in testing a modified version of the *WorkAdvance* Model. Many of the components and resources featured in the *WorkAdvance* model already exist within the Employment Ontario system. There would, however, need to be some substantive modifications at both a programmatic and systems level. These include:

- **Employer Focus:** An Employment Service provider would have to change from a generic approach to employers to a specific focus on a single industry in a community/region.
- **Client Focus:** An Employment Service provider will have to focus on individuals seeking employment within a specific industry sector, rather than dealing with broad range of job seekers.
 - Providers will have to extend services to workers already employed within the chosen sector.
 - While provisions for supporting low wage workers to retain employment currently exist within the EO system, this aspect would need to be emphasized and reinforced.
- **Permission to be Innovative:** Important features of *WorkAdvance* already exist within the funding system. The Canada Ontario Jobs Grant, Second Career, Wage Subsidies, etc. could resource many of the components within *WorkAdvance*. However, programs would have to be given “permission” to organize and allocate these resources differently. It is not clear that additional resources would be required in order for an employment service provider to implement a modified version of *WorkAdvance*. Programs may only need “permission” to do things differently.
- **A Different Kind of Capacity:** Currently, employment service providers must be all things to all people. This requires a solid understanding of local labour market conditions across numerous sectors, an ability to understand the needs of all job-seekers, and a general familiarity of hiring practices among employers. Sectoral initiatives ask services to move from the generic to the specific – to have deep knowledge of the recruitment, retention, certifications, occupations and advancement strategies of a specific industry sector. Lessons from *WorkAdvance* tell us that this requires programs to allocate the necessary time and resources to acquire and maintain this expertise.

EO Components Employment Services	WorkAdvance Components	Modifications required for EO for adoption of WA	Extent of Modification or Additional Resources Required
Client Service Planning and Coordination	Intensive Screening and Selection Process	Identify, screen and select appropriate clients who would be suitable for hybrid (<i>WorkAdvance</i>) type programming that is focused towards a specific sector(s).	✓✓
Employment Resources and Information	Sector-focused Pre-Employment and Career Readiness Preparation	Gear employment resources, information and pre-employment training towards the selected sector(s).	✓
Job Search and Matching	Sector-Specific Occupational Skills Training:	Provide dual stream opportunities with training first and/or placement first approaches based on client needs and industry requirements.	✓✓✓
Employment Placement and Incentives	Sector-Specific Job Development and Placement:	Utilize sector specific approach to job development and placement services that includes rigorous industry engagement with multiple employers within a sector.	✓✓
Job/Training Retention	Intensive post-employment retention and advancement Services (up to 2 years):	Provide fulsome case management and job retention services that address initial client issues when starting a job which also includes longer career advancement services.	✓✓

- ✓ Little or no resources/modifications required.
- ✓✓ Some resources/modifications required.
- ✓✓✓ Significant resources/modifications required.

VII. Service Provider Thoughts: Hybrid Models and WorkAdvance

The Toronto Workforce Innovation Group engaged with a number of Employment Ontario service providers in Toronto to assess their level of receptiveness to aspects of the *WorkAdvance* model. We conducted key informant interviews with program managers, employment counsellors and job developers to gather feedback on the strengths, opportunities, challenges or the overall response to hybrid and sector models (*WorkAdvance*) that include career retention and advancement

services. The following section highlights some of the common themes and findings from our interviews.

General Reception towards the *WorkAdvance* Model

Service providers overwhelmingly supported the concept of doing things differently and saw strong merit in hybrid models offering short-term sectoral training and career advancement strategies. Providers saw a need for these models and thought they have advantages that would lead to better employment and career advancement opportunities for their clients. Providers think that industry credentials offer benefits by “signaling” to employers that a prospective employment candidate has concrete skills and the motivation to work in the industry sector.

Most practitioners recognized the “critical” need for more intensive and comprehensive wrap-around supports (psychological, social, and financial) commonly associated with both hybrid and sectoral approaches. There was general consensus that these supports are required during initial job search and post-employment.

Interviewees strongly supported the inclusion of the employment retention and career advancement services that are part of the *WorkAdvance* model. A majority of interviewees indicated that “job-retention” and “occupational advancement” for more challenged job-seekers was the largest gap in the EO service framework. They noted that under the current EO model, they only have resources to follow-up with clients in order to track outcomes after employment, although some providers offer additional levels of support based on “concern” for their clients. Most interviewees believed it would be extremely beneficial for the current funding model to provide resources explicitly dedicated towards helping multi-barriered clients retain employment and advance in their careers.

Service providers noted that although they often have access to short-term occupational/sector training, there is a high level of demand for these types of programs. However, they admit these initiatives are very limited in terms of funding and availability. Service providers also stated that many of their most marginalized clients do not have access to job training because they do not qualify for Second Career, Canada Ontario Jobs Grant or other targeted training initiatives.

Several providers discussed the advantages of using sectoral approaches. They felt that this approach might provide greater focus to local service programming and allow for specialization to occur. The following sectors were identified by practitioners as having the appropriate amount of growth and labour demand to warrant a sectoral approach:

- Retail
- Logistics, transportation and warehousing,
- Food Services
- Food Processing (manufacturing), and

- Hospitality.

Practitioners suggested that extensive employer engagement would have to occur for a sector model to be successful. They recognized the necessity of building employer relationships and specific sectoral strategies. One program mentioned, based on their experience with a sector-training program, that it was challenging to find placements for every participant in a cohort if there is low demand or if they did not have “meaningful” and “established” employer relationships in that sector. All service providers agreed that, if piloted, the program would have to include some form of paid placement/employment subsidy, as most employers in Toronto are used to receiving incentives for the hiring of more challenging job-seekers.

The Needs of Clients

Providers discussed the wide range of job seekers they see every day and the varying levels of support they require. While employment service providers all encounter a wide range of clients, it appears that some service providers (pending on location) have a higher proportion of population groups with multiple barriers to employment including newcomers, youth, disabled, health, older workers and racialized minorities.

Many providers acknowledged an increasing number of job seekers with multiple barriers to employment. They mentioned that while there are many clients who were “work ready” and found jobs quite easily in the current EO system there were more clients who had been unemployed for long periods of time – or had been churning through multiple entry-level jobs. Feedback from interviews suggested that these job seekers (often characterized by low educational attainment) frequently have long spells of unemployment, sometimes find a precarious job, but come back for looking for help towards supporting their family. Types of populations that practitioners mentioned as more difficult to serve included the following characteristics:

- Criminal Records (particularly single males),
- Older Workers on Social Assistance,
- Youth who are “Not Employed, in Education or Training” (NEETS) with less than High School attainment.
- Single parents (mostly females) with children under the age of 5.

Several job developers mentioned that while training often made clients more attractive to employers, the recruiting, screening and selection process for the training may be more important than the training itself. For these employers, having the right people who want to work in that industry sector or occupation might have been a critical success factor. This included finding the appropriate individuals who were able to do work shift work, work long hours on their feet and/or be able to “physically” perform on the job. Ultimately, some job developers felt that the value

provided to employers was the savings on recruitment costs, and not necessarily the skills gained by participants.

Capacity to Deliver *WorkAdvance*

All organizations we interviewed see the value and potential opportunities inherent in sectoral and hybrid models. Furthermore, all employment service providers emphasized that counselling low-wage workers on career advancement was the single biggest need in their communities. Feedback suggests that some of the larger multi-service delivery providers or organizations with previous experience delivering these programs already have the requisite human resource capacity and infrastructure. Smaller agencies that do not currently offer such types of programs or don't have experience in providing sectoral training would need time to hire additional employees and develop their own internal capacity. However, it was clear that some of the smaller employment service appeared to be "nimble" enough to adapt towards a sector approach.

While all providers expressed interest in testing a model similar to *WorkAdvance*, they were apprehensive about running another "short term" pilot that may or may not have sustainable or ongoing funding. Providers articulated the need to have the resources and time to build relationships with employers and industry associations. All interviewees recognized that in order to be successful, programs providers need the appropriate time to test and evaluate the approach.

VIII. Moving Forward

As the province and City of Toronto try to connect more unemployed and underemployed

...models like WorkAdvance offer the potential to move the dial on the seemingly intractable problem of low-wage work.

individuals to career opportunities; hybrid and sectoral models like *WorkAdvance* offer the potential to move the dial on the seemingly intractable problem of low-wage work. Evidence from other jurisdictions and feedback

from Employment Ontario service providers suggests that these models may be of merit in assisting job-seekers/low-wage workers achieve positive wage trajectories.

Next generation employment service models such as *WorkAdvance* have value in that they can be aligned and/or built off of existing workforce/employment services at minimal cost in large Metropolitan areas (such as Toronto). They can provide a platform which supports jobseekers to not only get a job, but also to advance. Sectoral and hybrid models are purposefully designed to lift low income workers out of precarious employment into career opportunities. While the evidence of effectiveness about these next generation models is only starting to emerge – there is

strong consensus that the testing of a WorkAdvance type model is warranted and needed in Toronto.

With this in mind, the Toronto Workforce Innovation Group sees strong value in a hybrid and sectoral employment service delivery model in Toronto, after exploring whether and how to incorporate these models in a Toronto context. We recommend the piloting of a modified WorkAdvance model, with a rigorous evaluation. Before moving to scale or fully implementing a sectoral and hybrid model across the city – any piloting will need to answer the following critical questions:

1. What capacity is actually required to operate hybrid and sector-based programs?
2. Do post-employment supports actually have value to low-wage workers?
3. Can these models actually promote advancement for low-income and low-skilled adults where other programs have failed?
4. What is the actual cost of running this type of program (on an ongoing basis)?
5. Which types of job-seekers are most likely or least likely to benefit from this approach?
6. What industry sectors are most likely to benefit from this approach?
7. From a system's perspective; what is the right mix of generic employment services versus sectoral employment services in the City of Toronto?
8. What is the optimal time required to adequately test and evaluate this type of model?

End Notes

- ⁱ 95 Months Later: Turbulent Times in Toronto's Labour Market. Toronto Workforce Innovation Group, 2015.
- ⁱⁱ EO Employment Services offer employment and job search services to job seekers including; job search strategies, resume preparation, information about careers and occupations, local labour market information, training opportunities and information and referral to other employment and community services.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/10/01/minimum-wage-rises-but-workers-still-suffering.html>
- ^{iv} The Precarity Penalty: The Impact of Employment Precarity on Individuals, Households and Communities. Lewchuk, et al. Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario Research Group. 2015.
- ^v 95 Months Later.
- ^{vi} Redesigning Collaboration Opportunities for Innovation in Toronto's Labour. Shirey and Tan. Mowat Centre. 2014.
- ^{vii} A brief discussion of employment and training programming and labour market policies appears in section II.
- ^{viii} Meeting the Needs of Workers and Employers Implementation of a Sector-Focused Career Advancement Model for Low-Skilled Adults. Tessler et al. MDRC. 2014.
- ^{ix} What's Next in Welfare Reform. Herd, Dean. City of Toronto. 2006.
- ^x Herd, Dean. 2006. What Next in Welfare Reform. City of Toronto.
- ^{xi} It should be noted that in practice this doesn't necessarily hold true. Often some Employment Service providers (particularly in larger urban settings) will informally target job seekers from certain population groups (e.g. immigrants, persons with disabilities, youth, etc.)
- ^{xii} Tuning In to Local Labor Markets: Findings From the Sectoral Employment Impact Study, Clymer, Conway, Freely, Maguire and Schwartz. Public Private Ventures, 2010.
- ^{xiii} Essential Skills Ontario. Clearer Sightlines to Employment. 2012.
- ^{xiv} . 2008. Workforce development as an antipoverty strategy: What do we know? What should we do? Holzer, Harry. Urban Institute. 2008.
- ^{xv} Clearer Sightlines to Employment.
- ^{xvi} Over the past two years there has been increased attention on how to improve workforce development in Ontario, organizations like United Way Toronto York Region, Metcalf foundation, Civic Action, City of Toronto, Trillium Foundation, Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities have produced research papers/briefs, held forums and events to discussion sectorial approaches and work-based learning approaches. During this time these institutions have engaged the NYC Centre of Economic Opportunities, SkillsWorks and The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County (WDC), as well as, have investigated research and demonstration practices from CLASP, MDRC, I-BEST and notable workforce development initiatives.
- ^{xvii} NPower Canada is affiliated with NPower which is a tech community and provides individuals, nonprofits and schools opportunities to build tech skills for the IT industry. HWTC replicated and modified the training models from the Culinary Academy of Las Vegas which provides, employability, vocational skills and hands on experience to youth, adults, and displaced workers.
- ^{xviii} Workforce Innovations: Outcome Analysis of Outreach, Career Advancement and Sector-Focused Programs. Henderson, MacAllum and Karakus. NYC Center for Economic Opportunity. 2010.
- ^{xix} Meeting the Needs of Workers and Employers Implementation of a Sector-Focused Career Advancement Model for Low-Skilled Adults. Tessler, et al. MDRC. 2014.
- ^{xx} Working with Value: Industry-specific approaches to workforce development: A Synthesis of Findings. Conway, Mureen. The Aspen Institute. 2002.
- ^{xxi} Meeting the Needs of Workers and Employers Implementation of a Sector-Focused Career Advancement Model for Low-Skilled Adults.
- ^{xxii} Tuning in to Local Labor Markets: Findings from the Sectoral Employment Study. Randomized controlled trial found that participants in mature sector-focused programs earned significantly more, were more likely to work and work more consistently, be in jobs with higher wages and that offered benefits to their counterpart control group members.
- ^{xxiii} Innovate, Research, Repeat. New York City's Center for Economic Opportunity. 2011.
- ^{xxiv} Meeting the Needs of Workers and Employers Implementation of a Sector-Focused Career Advancement Model for Low-Skilled Adults.
- ^{xxv} The following elements to promote effective practice is found in Tessler, et al.
- ^{xxvi} The findings from WorkAdvance are all based on the interim evaluation, Tessler, et al.
- ^{xxvii} In terms of this review, or future implementation of the model in Toronto, this may be of concern. While the WorkAdvance model was supposed to be designed for those most at risk in the labour market, this did not necessarily translate into participant characteristic data at the site level.