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Quality of Life
CHALLENGE

Community Action Team

Waged Poor Focus Group

June 2005 Summary Report

INTRODUCTION

Outcome

The goal of the waged poor focus group was to gain a better understanding of what employers can do to help people who have paid work but are still near or below the poverty line move out of poverty. The Community Action Team hosts several focus groups a year, to help employers and employment agencies better understand what they can do to help people find paid work. The Community Action Team is an action-oriented group of people who are dedicated to making change in BC's Capital Region through the Quality of Life CHALLENGE and have experience living on limited or low incomes.

The participants were told that the information will be used:

- in written communication tools for employers like a brochure or a fact sheet;
- for a workshop which takes participants through some of the challenges faced by people living on low income. This workshop will be used with other employers.
- Some employers listening to the discussion may take the information back to their workplaces or share it with other employers they know.

Eight participants and three observers were present. Participants had a wide range of employment history, including food services, equipment repair, social services, retail, and laboratory work, among others. Observers represented financial and food services. For confidentiality, names are not listed. This report outlines the findings of the focus group.

Focus group structure

The focus group was conducted in a "fishbowl" style, where the participants sit in a circle, with observers sitting on the outside of the circle. Participants talk about their experiences with a particular issue and actions that could make a difference. Observers listening on the outside of the circle are people who have the power to make change on that issue. Several employers were invited to be observers.

Participants began by naming at least one success about a recent paid work situation, i.e. my co-workers are really nice, or my work is close to home, or my job is really interesting. Following this they discussed barriers from their own experiences or knowledge in terms of starting work, keeping work and making ends meet from work. There was some overlap between the three categories, but to prevent repetition, issues are only listed once. They then brainstormed options for action which would help to remove barriers. These were primarily options for employers, but also included actions for employees and services that could be provided by government or social service agencies.

Successes

I like working where I work. I like the people. It's a big company with lots of people. We form relationships over time at barbecues, staff parties, volleyball, etc. It's a good community and we all enjoy working together. I have been working there 15 years.

I have been working for almost three months and I like what I do. I am a dishwasher, or a Hobart engineer. Some young fellow came up with that to tell his mother what his job was. I just do my job. Some days are harder than others. I like being physically active; I'm not sitting and just doing nothing. I'm up and busy and I don't have too much time to think about anything.

I like the people I work with. I like being challenged, it makes the day go faster. I feel a lot more secure when I'm working than when I'm not.

When I was working part time repairing photocopiers it felt wonderful when I would have a success repairing a machine. The customer would be happy. I knew a lot of the customers I would see regularly. My boss was pretty good in allowing me time, it was great that he was understanding about my disability. I had a relationship with my employer that was pretty good most of the time. I worked there 12 years, eventually he got to trust my opinion. It is important to have a good relationship with your employer and co-workers.

I got to travel in my last job. It got me out of the hellhole I was in. I liked traveling in that context, but I'm not sure if I like traveling generally.

I am working in a Subway. I just started two weeks ago. I like to work with people very much. I like serving food to customers and when they are happy I am happy. I can improve my English there. I would like to have a workplace where my coworkers are like my family.

I am on disability benefits so I work part time to earn up to \$400 a month, the maximum amount I am allowed to earn. I love my job. One of the things I like is the flexibility. My employer gives me a lot of freedom to make my own hours. Because of my disability some days are better than others. They tell me this is the number of hours we want you to work and the amount of work we want done in a month. I appreciate the flexibility and self-direction which allows a lot of freedom. The more freedom I have the more I want to give. I go that extra mile because I get so much freedom in the work I do.

The most important thing in jobs I've had is having a relationship with employer where I am able to approach them to make suggestions about improvements and then see that my suggestion had an impact.

Before I started my job I was pretty introverted, I was shy and liked working behind the scenes. I wanted to improve my self confidence and increase my communication skills and assertiveness, and working in retail helped me do that.

Barriers Faced with Starting Work

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>First pay period's cheque held</p> <p><i>Starting a job after being on employment insurance my cheque was held for two weeks but I was also cut off EI. I had been on EI for three months. I'm not sure how I made it through those two weeks.</i></p>	<p>1. Employees could ask for an advance.</p> <p>2. Employers could offer advances. <i>My last employer did come to me and ask if I needed an advance. I was shocked because it's not a common practice.</i></p> <p><i>An advance means you're going into debt, which is especially worrying if it's a low wage job. An advance wouldn't work for me.</i></p>

	3. Employers could keep an emergency fund that employees can access if they need it.
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Barrier	Options for Action
<p>Car required</p> <p><i>Working a minimum wage job I can't afford to keep a car.</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes businesses with late night shifts want staff to have cars so employees can make it home safely.</i></p> <p><i>A car can be a necessity to do some jobs. You have to travel to see customers or deliver things.</i></p> <p><i>It can be very expensive to get a car and maintain insurance, repairs, gas etc. New drivers especially have high insurance rates.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could have a start up fund: each employee gets gas money for the first month.</p> <p>2. Employers could offer a car allowance and reimburse mileage and parking. <i>When I first started working I had a crappy old car. A car allowance helped to keep it working and mileage and parking covered costs.</i></p> <p>3. Employers concerned about late night travel could offer to cover taxi costs or help set up carpools amongst employees.</p> <p>4. Employers could provide cars if cars required for work. They could have company cars, lease cars for employees or join the Victoria Car Share Co-op.</p> <p>5. Employers could provide bike trailers to carry supplies. Bikes are less expensive to purchase and maintain.</p>
<p>Transportation to work</p> <p><i>I don't have a car and am dependent on public transit. Sometimes transit doesn't get you to work when it is supposed to. It would be nice if employers would understand that things don't always work out when you depend on transit.</i></p> <p><i>If I haven't been making money but now I have to take the bus, where does the money come from to take the bus until the first pay cheque? Sometimes if shifts start before buses are running you have to catch cabs. That can be a good couple of hours of work just to cover transportation.</i></p> <p><i>I chose to leave a job because of a 1.5 hour commute each day by car; 2.5 hours by bus.</i></p> <p><i>I had a job on a chicken farm. I had to ride my bike out there by 8am, do hard physical labour all day and then ride home. I couldn't keep the job.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could have a start up fund: each employee gets a bus pass for the first month.</p> <p>2. Employees could move closer to their job site once the job is secure.</p> <p>3. If employers and employees have good communication employers will trust employees if they are late occasionally because of transit.</p> <p>4. Employers could coordinate work schedules with transit schedules in areas with low bus service.</p>
<p>Cultural / religious insensitivity</p> <p><i>I can't wear a hijab at work. I have to tie it back like a bandana, which loses the point of wearing it. I find it hard to get a job when go in to interview with the hijab.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could access diversity training for themselves and staff. The Inter-Cultural Association of Victoria offers this. Employment agencies should also be aware of these issues.</p>

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>Work clothing required including uniforms, ties, shoes, safety boots, and raingear.</p> <p><i>When I first started working I had trouble with shoes. I had old shoes but I wanted new shoes. I felt embarrassed. I am still having trouble with shoes.</i></p> <p><i>I got a job and had to buy black pants and a white shirt. I worked three days and was then told it was on call. I had to buy the pants and shirt before being paid.</i></p>	<p>Options for Action</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers could provide a start up fund for employees to cover clothing. If employees leave during probation it comes out of their last pay cheque. 2. Many employment agencies provide start up clothing for people receiving employment assistance (welfare) if clients know to ask. JobWave and Destinations provide vouchers. 3. Employers could host a clothing swap to help new employees access clothing.
<p>Clean clothing</p> <p><i>I had a job with uniforms. Coming to work with a clean uniform was a big issue, but I didn't have enough money for laundry. You only have one uniform, so they expect you to do laundry every night but if you have to pay for laundry that can be really expensive.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers could provide multiple uniforms, either at no cost or at a discounted cost. 2. Employers could factor laundry costs into employees' wages.
<p>Being the new employee</p> <p><i>It's hard to break into the organization as a new person. It's an unwelcoming work environment as the new person on the block.</i></p> <p><i>I work in a family business. I'm the newcomer so it's difficult. There is no place to express ideas or suggest positive changes.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers could provide a mentoring program with a co-worker. 2. Employers could arrange for a sort of welcome wagon for new employees.
<p>Job security</p> <p><i>I have started a job several times, worked two or three days, and then been told that they don't really want me. You go through all the process of getting off income assistance, and it can be hard to get back on.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers could be more clear about the probation period and employees' status as casual or temporary employees. 2. Employers could be made more aware of labour laws.
<p>Inadequate orientation</p> <p><i>Often there is not an adequate orientation. Employers are interested in getting someone in the position and don't take the time to share information about the work. This can be isolating.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers could provide a thorough orientation, make sure that employees are comfortable with their tasks, check in with employees and welcome questions. 2. More training could be available for free or low cost before you start work. A lot of training is industry specific (restaurant) but not business specific (McDonalds).

Barriers Faced with Keeping Work

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>Employees' ideas not heard</p> <p><i>In my work I offer good ideas but they aren't going anywhere. Then the employer asks why sales are down. They aren't listening to employees.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could seek out ideas from employees (staff meetings, feedback forms, etc.)</p> <p>2. Employees could speak up or write letters to present ideas.</p>
<p>Seasonal work</p> <p><i>I started as an auxiliary worker 15 years ago. I am still auxiliary so I am laid off from January to April and have to go on and off EI. Retail work is seasonal work.</i></p>	<p>No ideas for action</p> <p>As long as it's clear to employees when hired, that's how it is, the seasons don't change.</p>
<p>Job security</p> <p><i>I worked for several months at one job and was just fired one day. I didn't know who to talk to.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could provide an anonymous process for employees to raise problems.</p> <p>2. Employers could provide frequent feedback on how employees are doing.</p> <p>3. Employees can work hard. <i>To keep your job, you have to make sure you're doing your job.</i></p> <p>4. Employees need an outside advocacy place they can go to ask for assistance and guidance on labour issues.</p>
<p>Professional development</p> <p><i>The last job I had I was fired mainly because I was not up to date on the newest technology. It was a small company and the employer couldn't afford to pay to train staff.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could pay for or share training costs. Employers could budget for training and ensure that all employees share in accessing training. Where employers can't afford training costs they may be able to support staff to continue to learn through flex hours etc.</p> <p>2. Employees could do some training on own initiative (read books)</p>
<p>Downsizing</p> <p><i>When companies lose contracts they let employees go.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers can support employees to keep up with lifelong learning and training so they are ready to get a new job. This can be done through formal education or volunteering.</p>

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>Split shifts</p> <p><i>When you work four hours on and four hours off getting daycare is very hard. Almost all daycare is geared for 9-5 work.</i></p> <p><i>Paying for transportation four times a day is hard.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could consider the impact of split shifts and try to coordinate schedules that work for employees – recognising that sometimes split shifts are necessary.</p>
<p>Heavy workload</p> <p><i>I had one job with a list of tasks for each shift and you had to finish each task by the end of the day. Some shifts were jammed full with things you needed to do and there was lots of stress and nowhere to vent.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could provide a good orientation including assessments of how long primary tasks will take.</p> <p>2. Employers and co-workers could offer regular positive reinforcement.</p> <p>3. Employers could provide an anonymous process for employees to raise problems in the business.</p>
<p>Cultural / religious insensitivity</p> <p><i>I won't work on Sundays and I have had trouble finding work that allows me to take that day off. In a low income bracket there are lots of employees who will work Sundays.</i></p> <p><i>Discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, disability or anything creates a very negative environment even for the people who aren't receiving it.</i></p> <p><i>I have an accent because English is my second language. I had a supervisor once who pretended she never understood me and then complained to my manager about my bad communication skills. My co-workers all understood me. That's the only thing she could complain about; my work was good. I quit that job.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could access diversity training for themselves and staff. The Inter-Cultural Association of Victoria offers this. Employment agencies should also be aware of these issues.</p>
<p>Power abuse</p> <p><i>Abusive and exploitative bosses are very common. Some employers don't understand the link between losing people and not treating them well.</i></p> <p><i>Employees have to endure their boss' emotional problems.</i></p>	<p>1. Information could be shared with employers connecting Human Resource practices and retention rates.</p> <p>2. Employers and employees should respect each other.</p>

Making Ends Meet from Paid Work

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>High cost of housing</p> <p><i>All my money goes to rent.</i></p> <p><i>If you're only making \$1000 a month you need help. I used to pay 74% of my income for housing. With subsidized housing you have an extra \$50 -\$100 month that makes a big difference.</i></p> <p><i>I have a rental subsidy so I can afford to work for very little money. I don't mind getting a low wage because my rent is low.</i></p>	<p>Options for Action</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Information about who can access subsidized housing needs to be shared more widely. 2. Information could be shared with employers about costs of housing so they can factor that in when they are setting wages and regular hours. <i>Employers won't pay based on costs of living; they pay based on what they can get someone for.</i> 3. Employers could be more flexible about multiple job holding, recognizing that if they only are able to offer part time hours at a low wage, employees need second or third jobs to make ends meet.
<p>Training wage</p> <p><i>The training wage is too low.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask the government to get rid of the training wage.
<p>Earning exemptions</p> <p><i>People receiving disability benefits or with multi-barriered status are able to earn a limited amount of money over benefits. Anything over that gets deducted and if you earn too much you risk losing your disability status. The policies are counterproductive; it's a disincentive to work. You can't get a part time job that will pay you enough to live on, but your body won't support you working full time.</i></p> <p><i>People on basic income assistance have no earning exemption. A lot of people who qualify for multi-barriered status don't want to be labeled that way even though the rate is higher.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers could offer part time work at a living wage. 2. Employers could provide positions with flexible hours or job sharing depending on health for employees with disabilities.
<p>No ability to save</p> <p><i>Some jobs only give you enough money to survive. You can't save anything; you live pay cheque to pay cheque. You don't move up, but you can't afford to quit the job and look for new work.</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Employers could pay a wage based on basic costs of living. <i>Sometimes minimum wage is all they can afford. How would that impact small businesses?</i> 2. The federal government could provide a guaranteed annual income. 3. Employers could promote from within.

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>Sick leave and medical costs</p> <p><i>Once I was sick with pneumonia and had no medical coverage from work. I hadn't been working long enough to get medical EI. I had to work while I was ridiculously sick, but I still missed some shifts. My rent was late and I had to explain to my landlord. I could have been evicted. I had no money for medical costs like prescriptions.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could share information about the Pharmacare program. <i>Pharmacare operates based on taxes from earlier years, so if you made a lot of money before and now have a low paying job you might not qualify.</i></p> <p>2. Employers could offer medical benefits and waive the probationary period to get onto benefits for new employees.</p> <p>3. Employers could offer sick time or personal days to cover family illnesses.</p>
<p>Social events at work</p> <p><i>Once you are working your social life increases and that has a whole added expense. Going to parties at a co-workers' home, exchanging gifts at Christmas, charity drives all cost money that you might not easily have.</i></p> <p><i>If you don't participate in social activities you don't build relationships with your co-workers.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could consider the cost of social activities when planning. Offer low cost or free social events, or ask employees if they are willing to pay for events over time (i.e. \$2 each month) <i>Employers understand there is a benefit to the business to build relationships between employees; this helps with retention.</i></p>
<p>Crisis situations</p> <p><i>I have a friend whose husband was laid off. They were supporting seven members of their family. While he was waiting for EI she had to work 90 hours a week to make ends meet.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could provide an emergency fund for employees' crisis situations.</p> <p>2. Employees could ask employers for help, like more hours or flexibility if working multiple jobs.</p>

Through the discussion several points were raised about barriers to finding work and getting hired. These are recorded below and will be combined with information from a future focus group about looking for work.

Finding work

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>Soft job skills</p> <p><i>Employers expect you to have a certain level of social skills to be able to get along with co-workers.</i></p> <p><i>When you have been out of work for years your confidence and self esteem are low.</i></p> <p><i>Many of us have worked independently and need to be trained on working as a team.</i></p>	<p>1. Employment agencies could provide expanded life and work skill training to include soft skills.</p> <p>2. Employers could offer job shadowing for people to integrate into the workforce.</p> <p>3. Employers could encourage mentorship relationships for new employees to help them along in an organization.</p>

Barrier	Options for Action
<p>Experience needed</p> <p><i>Employers expect you to have training and experience a lot of jobs. You can have a 6 month diploma but still need experience to get the job.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could be willing to provide training.</p>
<p>Need local references</p> <p><i>I don't know many people here. A teacher gave me a reference once but they only knew me in school, not in a work site.</i></p>	<p>1. Employers could accept personal or character references from landlords, teachers, and friends.</p> <p>2. Employers could accept volunteer experience and references.</p> <p><i>At one place I started volunteering I had to work 56 hours to get a reference and I had 4 hour shifts each week. If you need a job right away that can be too late.</i></p>

CONCLUSION

The notes from the fishbowl were sent to all participants and observers to check for accuracy and to provide feedback. Several participants who wanted to attend but were unable to were also invited to provide feedback on the notes. The notes, contained in this report, are being used to develop communications tools for employers to better understand the issues faced by low waged workers.