

Competency of Career Development Practitioners for Virtual Services

Research Report
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Abstract

Like many other professionals, career development professionals (CDPs) were forced to transition their services to virtual delivery at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This transition occurred with little warning or preparation time for CDPs to create and implement plans. There has been scarce research on CDPs and their needs following the transition to virtual service delivery. This research conducted a needs assessment of CDPs through a comprehensive survey based on The National Competency Profile for Career Development Professionals (Canadian Career Development Foundation [CCDF], 2021) and nine focus groups with practitioners working with underrepresented populations in the workforce. We found a small effect of age on how difficult CDP found the move to virtual service delivery and numerous areas of challenge for practitioners. This report identifies which competencies have become easier for CDPs since the move to virtual services and which areas have become harder. We then highlight the worries CDPs have moving forward with virtual service delivery and provide recommendations for supporting CDPs and their clients. Finally, this report provides a framework for learning interventions that will help build CDP competency and sector resiliency.



Executive Summary

COVID-19 caught many people, including Career Development Practitioners, unprepared and unaware of the role virtual services play in current labour markets. Before COVID-19, funders in BC made the provision of virtual services mandatory, yet many employment service organizations failed to comprehend or acknowledge this requirement. When those helping the unemployed do not understand the virtual world and lack the skills to navigate it effectively, how can they teach clients to comprehend it? The employment services sector has not kept up with the knowledge required to move clients forward with this new reality. Key is using technology and innovative practice to move the entire industry forward.

This project aims to determine what virtual skills practitioners in BC currently have, identify gaps in their virtual competencies, and develop a learning intervention to build bridges to these competencies. Particularly hard-hit populations, sectors, and regions are impacted as practitioners serve all groups across all regions in BC. As we move into the pandemic recovery stage, having both practitioners and the unemployed learn and understand how to navigate the virtual world is critical if we are to meet the needs of the future world of work. Determining a baseline through research is a crucial first step.

We collected research data in two phases. In phase one, we convened a Virtual Learning Consortium of eight career development leaders who helped determine our survey questions. The survey was distributed to the BC sector at large and based on the newly released which followed the newly released list of 26 competencies determined by the Canadian Career Development Foundation (2021). We received 185 responses, and through those responses, we identified CDPs who deliver services to the underrepresented in employment for the nine focus groups (N=58) that followed. Both the qualitative and quantitative data support the overall findings. Of the 26 competencies for career development practitioners, we identified the following top five CDP activities as easier/somewhat easier and harder/somewhat harder on a Likert scale.

Competencies Harder or Somewhat Harder in a Virtual Environment:

1. Engaging with reluctant clients
2. Helping clients with accessibility (e.g., digital literacy, transportation)
3. Building rapport and creating positive relationships with clients
4. Addressing client's health (e.g., negative health behaviours such as smoking or social anxiety)
5. Reducing cultural challenges in communication or ideas

Competencies Easier or Somewhat Easier in a Virtual Environment:

1. Accessing opportunities for personal career growth (e.g., certification courses)
2. Learning new technologies
3. Understanding and staying up to date on labour market trends
4. Managing workload
5. Accessing mental health supports for myself and other career practitioners



The focus groups revealed that CDPs are concerned about underrepresented clients in the workforce, particularly those who are low-income, those from rural, remote, and northern communities, and those who lack access to technology, digital literacy, or dependable and affordable internet service. Issues surrounding the safety and security of their virtual presence and lack of privacy, especially for women fleeing violence, created additional challenges for CDPs helping their clients. Once addressed, CDPs reported that they were able to serve clients who could not easily attend in-person sessions, such as those with disabilities, those with geographical hurdles, and those caring for others at home.

In non-urban environments, CDPs were concerned about being able to connect clients to wrap-around services and were concerned that if virtual services moved away from community-based connections, a lack of local services would become dangerous for some clients.

All interviewed believe that virtual career development services are here to stay after the pandemic but are concerned about groups underrepresented in the workforce, particularly those with barriers to employment, and suggest that a hybrid model is ideal (in-person combined with virtual services). All agreed that more training for virtual services is needed for CDPs and the clients they serve.

Using the findings within this research project, ETHOS Career Management Ltd. created a learning platform with sample content focusing on four categories of CDP learning: virtual communications and relationship-building, digital literacy, mental health and wellness, and building capacity in service delivery. Within each category are nine associated course topics, such as engaging clients online, age-based accessibility, de-escalation practices, and facilitating online. CDPs can self-direct their learning on a pathway to virtual competency, testing their knowledge while collecting credentials. A demonstration video showing how the research is applied to a practical learning can be found at <https://vimeo.com/651689590/ed51f8ad98>.



Based on the results of this research, we recommend the following:

1. Invest in upskilling Career Development Practitioners to meet the needs of a virtual environment. Further develop a learning pathway for career development practitioners to increase their competencies to address their own digital skills, supporting their clients'



digital skills, and to address the complexity of career development practice when working with barriered and underrepresented groups in employment.

2. Employment program funders should be aware that any implementation of online employment services should remain community-based; particularly for those who are low-income, those from rural, remote, and northern communities, and those with barriers to employment. Access to technology, digital literacy, and undependable and unaffordable internet service is a challenge of note to CDPs.
3. Resist the urge to create large virtual employment service catchments. CDPs are experts on the ground who can see unique conditions of the labour market from both the supply and demand sides. They have relationships with both parties.

Virtual delivery is here to stay. This research supports the need for low-barrier, learning opportunities that are aligned with the 26 competencies from the Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals (CCDF, 2021). To build resiliency and capacity within the sector, this training must be accessible, easy to navigate, and have connections to credentialling and micro credentialling. It is necessary learning for CDPs to support their clients on the employment journeys.



Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly shifted many occupations, including those in the career development sector, to virtual or remote work in hopes of protecting both clients and workers. This quick transition left many unprepared and unaware of the role virtual services play in current labour markets. These changes affected the social service fields, and many began to work from home or in office spaces that allowed little to no in-person client interactions. This transition to virtual¹ work highlighted challenges for the career development sector and career development practitioners (CDPs). Additionally, a 2012 study undertaken by the BC Centre for Employment Excellence found that among various service delivery methods, virtual services were least preferred by practitioners (Neault & Pickerell, 2013).

The long-term effects of COVID-19 on the labour market will be severe. Beyond the unemployment issues exacerbated by the pandemic, many individuals are transitioning between occupations, sectors, or regions both during and post-pandemic (OCED, 2020). Those who had one career before the start of the pandemic may now be thinking about switching careers and would benefit from access to upskilling and supports to build their career development competencies. The effects of this pandemic on a shifting labour market have created a "career-shock" that will have lasting impacts both locally and globally (Akkermans et al., 2020). CDPs play a large part in mitigating the impact of these current and anticipated changes (OCED, 2020). Career development services have a crucial role in solving the problems of workplaces in the current and emerging labour market (Luken, 2019). OCED (2020) foresees that although some services may transition back into in-person work, digitization plays a significant role in managing the anticipated influx of clients seeking CDP help. Additionally, some research suggests that developing career competencies and resilience may help to mitigate career shock (Akkermans et al., 2020).

CDP Competencies

The role of CDPs is complex, both for in-person and with virtual service delivery. To create a solid foundation for the professionalization of the career development sector within Canada, a multi-year project has recently culminated in the new The National Competency Profile for Career Development Professionals (Canadian Career Development Foundation [CCDF], 2021). In this document, CCDF recognizes 65 competencies across 16 series that are necessary for CDP success. These competencies are clustered into two sections, Professional Practice, CDP Characteristics. The delivery of these competencies through the work of dedicated CDPs is crucial for the future of Canadian job markets and economies (OCED, 2020). This new framework of competencies and skills will help to identify what the outcomes of CDP education,

¹ Virtual work is also described in this report as online work/service delivery; although they are different entities, our participants referred to them synonymously, and therefore so do we.



certification, and training should focus on, as well as a basis for evaluating the successes and needs of CDPs in BC and across Canada. These competencies come at a pivotal point for CDP workers, individuals, and organizations as the events of the global COVID-19 pandemic have forced many work operations to move fully or partially virtual.

The standardization of these competencies is a relatively new framework for CDPs, and there has been little to no research using these skills explicitly. There is also limited research on how the transition of CDP work to virtual or virtual platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic has affected CDPs' ability to master and demonstrate these competencies. This study extends the literature by including the framework of these vital competencies. Through this lens, we were able to identify which actions related to CDP competencies pose the greatest challenge in providing virtual services, as well as which competencies CDPs self-identified as being undertrained in. Throughout this study, we utilized the series, as well as their various competencies, as a basis for our inquiries and these competencies became the foundation for the needs assessment survey in our research. We do not reference the competencies directly by name, as they were in their final stage of development at the time of our inquiries. However, we used them as the framework for our data collection and conversations.

Pre-Pandemic CDP Work

CDPs are not immune to the general challenges of everyday work in the twenty-first century. Virtual work may exacerbate pre-existing areas of challenge for CDPs. Career professionals face challenges both in in-person service and in a virtual world. The 2019 CERIC Survey of Career Service Professionals identified the top three barriers to success for CDPs in Canada as heavy workload, insufficient time with clients/students, and inadequate financial resources (CERIC, 2020). These challenges, as well as burnout and poor salary/income, were identified as the key issues causing career professionals to leave their field (CERIC, 2020). A strong post-pandemic economy and the labour market will rely on CDPs. Some competencies are of particular importance to mitigate this shock and help clients through a potentially unstable economy and labour market.

Virtual career development practice has potential limitations; Sampson, Kettunen, and Vuorinen (2019) identified that virtual service results in lower quality of assessments, lower quality of information, and challenges with technological abilities by both the practitioner and the client. Further, they acknowledged that CDPs themselves might not have the competencies to provide distance support using technology (p. 200). Sampson et al. concluded that CDP skills must evolve to meet the demands of a virtual environment and that this evolution is necessary for clients to access the expertise of career professionals (p. 205). Exploring and identifying solutions to these problems is of great importance to increase the use of technology and innovative practice to move the entire industry forward.

Prior to moving services virtual, a major source of challenge in hiring career counsellors is that "most candidates have limited counselling skills" (CERIC, 2019). This is concerning, given that counselling skills, including active listening, reframing, motivational interviewing, and facilitating



self-efficacy and self-confidence, are incredibly important in facilitating client-practitioner relationships, achieving evidence-based outcomes, and influencing hiring decisions (CERIC, 2019; Walters et al., 2014).

Forging a client-practitioner relationship is difficult and has a plethora of factors to consider. Neault (2002) wrote that, of the difficulties facing practitioners, encouraging and promoting optimism and hope is perhaps one of the most arduous. This is significant; facilitating optimism and hope in the face of career challenges is a substantial predictor of both career success and job satisfaction (Walters et al., 2014). Yukl (2006) identified three key client needs that are necessary to meet prior to addressing any other goals: inclusion, affection, and shared control. Building these perspectives is contingent on overcoming the natural feeling of vulnerability and apprehension felt by many clients, typically by creating a relationship built on mutual trust and the feeling that practitioners are collaborative rather than authoritative (Walters et al., 2014). Of high importance is also to create a space where a client feels that they "matter" (Schlossberg, Lunch, & Chickering, 1989). According to Amundson et al. (2009), mattering has three key components: visibility, offering of help, and active listening.

According to Walters and colleagues (2014), mattering is often expressed not by verbal cues but by non-verbal actions; clients can feel that they matter simply by being offered a drink or given the choice of which chair they can sit in when arriving at the office. Moving to virtual services may prove difficult in showing the client that the practitioner truly cares and having the client feel that they matter. Active listening is often non-verbal; however, it may also include verbal interactions that work well in person but become interruptive when on video. Walters and colleagues (2014) identified five major areas of active listening which may prove troublesome in virtual settings, including skills that, although effective in person, can be distracting and interruptive during video and phone calls, ultimately derailing productive conversations. These are the Following, Equal I–Thou language, Body Language, Eye Contact, and Relaxed Response.

As well, there are further challenges that would have been near impossible to identify prior to moving virtual. For example, camera angles make a large difference in how people maintain eye contact with other individuals; depending on how the webcam is situated, there can be a miscommunication with respect to how attentive the participants of the call are and how much they feel they matter (Chan & Au-Yeung, 2021).

Moving to a virtual service delivery model can make many of these already difficult challenges even more difficult. Reframing in person, for example, often occurs in the middle of emotional rants or stories, where the CDP may have to interrupt negative thought patterns to reframe them. This can be very difficult to do with video conferencing software. Many other areas of service delivery may become more difficult over video, reducing client emotional outbursts, reacting appropriately to physical behaviours, and recognizing physical stress reactions such as sweating or fidgeting. According to the 2019 CERIC survey, CDPs may already struggle with counselling-related skills, and moving client-practitioner interactions online likely does not provide an easier avenue of service for these gaps (CERIC, 2019).



A recent meta-analysis on virtual counselling has shown that in-person and virtual interventions did not significantly differ in outcomes (Batastini et al., 2021). Hames and colleagues (2020) have found that therapeutic modalities offered virtually are effective but posit that the effectiveness is contingent on specific competence to perform virtual therapy. Despite the great challenges in moving therapeutic skills to a virtual delivery method, it can be effective. Furthermore, career counsellors were left out of typical telehealth training sessions that other professionals dependent on therapeutic skills were offered. There are no studies, to our knowledge, that have looked at how the move to virtual services has impacted the delivery of relationship-building-related skills for CDPs.

CDPs work with employers and stakeholders to create employment opportunities for clients in local contexts. This may look like working to address gaps in service, compiling lists of potential employers and employees or initiating contact between employers and clients. CDPs need to support developers in recruitment and searching for appropriate candidates and aid in selection processes. The pandemic-related layoffs and shift to virtual services may have made community connections more difficult for CDPs to maintain. It is increasingly important that CDPs retain these relationships in order to support their clients (OCED, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic will inevitably change labour markets and demands (OECD, 2020). CDPs must be aware of and respond to these changes.

A transition to virtual work across many sectors means that CDPs may have to help clients with the digitization of their benefit plans or other work-related supports (OCED, 2020). CDPs must also be able to work with clients on various aspects of career development, including creating resumes, communications, portfolios, and value propositions; securing good references; preparing for interviews; and establishing professional networks. CDPs must offer appropriate guidance tailored to their client's individual needs. As the types of jobs available shift, CDPs must be prepared to shift their approach to working with clients. For example, CDPs may have to aid in preventing unemployment by guiding clients through new work agreements or terms, including an influx in short-time work (OCED, 2020). They will have to encourage job seekers to actively look for work and provide constantly updated training and information (OCED, 2020). They may also need to host more virtual job fairs, and tailor goals to target employment that is available during the pandemic (OCED, 2020).

Sanders et al. (2020) discussed the transition to virtual services and recommended the need to apply a change management strategy that puts the needs of the client first, blending types of technology and media. They suggested that it is necessary to work with existing cultures to create learning environments that best meet the needs of the client. Further, Sampson et al. (2020) concluded that CDP skills must evolve to meet the demands of a virtual environment and that this evolution is necessary for clients to access the expertise of career professionals. Banks and colleagues (2020) found that challenges for workers in the virtual social care field included maintaining trust, dignity, and service user autonomy during remote work. Another challenge is providing specific, tailored services to fit each individual client's needs; Banks and colleagues (2020) found that a large challenge for workers was allocating the limited resources at their disposal and balancing the rights and needs of clients, practitioners, and other parties.



Research Questions

This research project more broadly addresses three main questions. (1) What competencies related to virtual learning and facilitation need to become standard knowledge and practice in the industry? (2) What skills in offering virtual service do CDPs in BC currently have? and what do they lack? (3) How can pilot programs, based on the answers to (1) and (2), develop and offer competency training in BC? This paper addresses the first two goals and makes suggestions for future competency training based on the data collected, as well as suggestions for CDPs themselves.

To address these potential skills gaps, this research project comprised a needs assessment of CDPs delivering services in British Columbia and the competencies needed to offer virtual services. Through a virtual survey and nine focus groups with CDPs working with vulnerable populations, this research identifies the skills gaps that may have emerged or been exacerbated during virtual service delivery, and, based on the data, offers recommendations for upskilling practitioners and the clients they serve. Having these skills will promote resilience in the industry. As labour markets move into the pandemic recovery stage, having both practitioners and their clients learn and understand how to navigate the virtual world is critical if we are to meet the needs of the future world of work; virtual service delivery is likely to stay in the future. As well, the implications of the pandemic may shift over time (Akkermans et al., 2020), indicating the necessity to have a plan and strong partnerships to mitigate these possible struggles and barriers.

Methods

Data collection was conducted in two phases, using a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach using a survey and subsequent focus group discussions. We employed an explanatory design of data collection to expand on our quantitative results with qualitative data collection (see Creswell & Clark, 2017 for further information on explanatory mixed-method data collection). This method allowed us to both follow up on our quantitative results as well as was used as a method to select participants for qualitative collection. Participants in the survey were asked to select which underserved populations if any, they worked with for more than 50% of the time. These categories included: immigrants, newcomers, and refugees; older workers; persons with disabilities or with mental health or addiction challenges; people from rural, remote, and northern communities; people with essential skills gaps; adults without post-secondary education; racialized individuals; those fleeing domestic violence; veterans; women; and youth. Participants for the qualitative data collection of focus groups were selected both from their answers to this question through snowball methods and Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training (ASPECT BC)'s contacts.

Furthermore, the two phases of data collection were as follows: Phase 1 of our data collection employed a custom-designed online survey of career and employment service providers in BC.



Phase 2 comprised nine focus groups to explore further the impact of the shift to virtual services on underrepresented populations in the workforce. These two complementary phases allowed us to gather comprehensive data from CDPs all over BC, as well as to focus on the unique barriers that exist in delivering virtual services to specific populations. It also allowed us to validate and expand on our survey results.

Consultation

We consulted with a group of eight career development leaders from a Virtual Learning Consortium (VLC) convened for this project; they provided guidance throughout the project through data collection consultation. The VLC consulted with us and provided an added validity check to our research focus. We presented them with our preliminary ideas for research focus, and the group verified and supplemented areas of concentration. With the support of the VLC and informal conversations with members of the ASPECT BC, we were able to condense an extensive draft of survey questions to a manageable number of items that could be reasonably completed within 10-15 minutes. Testing of both the survey and the focus group protocol was completed with the guidance of the VLC, which gave us the ability to refine and restructure our questions to best address the needs of the sector.

Survey Development

Combining a broad literature review with the competency framework from the Canadian Career Development Foundation (2021), we were able to create a focused list of survey questions and focus group topics. To further narrow down our questions, we conducted a narrow literature review organized by the list of competencies and compiled an inventory of potential questions based on this literature.

Survey and focus group participants were recruited through ASPECT BC's members and social media ads (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) in an attempt to reach a broad range of CDPs from all over British Columbia. During our survey data collection via Microsoft Forms, we were overrun by bots that began responding to our survey in swarms. Luckily, research assistants noticed the bots quickly and promptly began finding patterns in the bots' responses. These included selecting a province of service delivery outside of British Columbia, leaving the majority of questions blank, and leaving irrelevant or incorrect job titles. Through these criteria and more (see King-Nyberg et al., 2021), we were able to clear bot responses from the survey results. After comprehensive data cleaning to remove bots and incomplete survey responses, we were left with 179 responses (N=179) and held nine focus groups with 58 CDPs who deliver services to a wide variety of clients.

Survey

The survey tool was structured into two parts. Part 1 gathered basic demographic information such as gender identity, age, years of employment within the career development sector, and level of education. Part 2 was grounded in the new competency framework for Canadian CDPs



(CCDF, 2021). This part assessed various competencies - such as “Building rapport and creating positive relationships with your clients.” Participants rated each statement on the degree of change since their transition to virtual services using a 5-point Likert scale. The scale consisted of 0 = Not Applicable, 1 = Much Easier, 2 = Somewhat Easier, 3 = No Change, 4 = Somewhat Harder, and 5 = Much Harder.

Focus Groups

In addition to our survey, we conducted nine focus groups with providers who served various populations. These focus groups lasted between 60-90 minutes and were conducted via Zoom by the project’s research assistants. Focus groups were facilitated with a semi-structured interview guide which focused on the move to virtual services and was used as a method to validate and confirm survey responses. Prompts centred on CDPs’ individual experiences and thoughts surrounding the transition to virtual service delivery, as well as how they were able to effectively use the necessary competencies to serve groups of underrepresented clients. Questions during focus groups concentrated on their general thoughts about the transition to virtual services, as well as validating and expanding on survey-related results. For example, participants were asked their thoughts about the top 5 action-related competencies that survey results indicated had gotten harder (see the Figure 1 below). Participants were asked to volunteer for a maximum of two focus groups based on the populations that they specialized in. Each focus group had 3 - 10 participants and, in total, included 58 CDPs from various areas and locations across British Columbia.

The qualitative analysis was conducted by our two research assistants, as well as ASPECT’s CEO, who began by relistening to focus group recordings and conducted a thematic analysis through shared Google documents. After identifying major themes in the data (technology challenges, technology successes, safety and security, geography, relations and rapport, and mental health), relevant quotations were extracted from the recordings and logged in the same document. Each recording was examined by at least two researchers, and themes were validated by multi-reviewers on the team. These quotes became the backbone of our qualitative analysis as they illuminated the experiences of CDPs and gave context to the survey results.

Quantitative Analysis: Survey Results

Descriptive Statistics

Excel, Python, and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) were used for various areas of statistical analysis.

Approximately 78% of participants best identified with the gender identity of woman, 21% man, and 1% non-binary. All the participants worked primarily with clients based in British Columbia - the targeted province for this study. The majority of participants were between the ages of 45-54 (33%), 35-44 (28%), or 55-64 (23%). A smaller subset of participants was between the ages of



25-34 (10%) or 18-24 (3%), or were 65+ (3%). Most participants (45%) had worked in the career development sector for 10+ years. Interestingly, the next largest number of participants (31%) were relatively new to the sector, having worked in it for only 1-5 years; 23% had worked in the sector for between 5-10 years, and 9% for less than 1 year. Most participants held a bachelor's degree (32%) or a college diploma (27%).

Participants were almost equally divided in terms of completion of a training program related to career development, with 51% reporting "yes" and 49% reporting "no". These programs included SFU's Career Development Practitioner Certificate Program, Douglas College's Career Development Practice Certificate, Life Strategies' Career Management Professional Program, and Langara's Career Development Professional certificate, among others. Some participants had only completed the required ethics and theories courses for certification in the sector rather than comprehensive career development training programs. Participants represented a wide range of roles and titles, including Job Developer, Employment and Client Coordinator, Employment Advisor, Career Educator, and many others.



Table 1 Percentage for all Demographic Variables (N=179)

Variables	Proportion
Gender Identity	
Man	21%
Woman	78%
Non-Binary	1%
Province/Territory	
British Columbia	100%
Age	
18-24	3%
25-34	10%
35-44	28%
45-54	33%
55-64	23%
65+	3%
Years of Employment in the Career Development Sector	
Less than 1 year	9%
1-5 years	31%
5-10 years	15%
10+ years	46%
Level of Education	
Complete High School or GED	4%
College Diploma	27%
Bachelor's Degree	32%
Post-Graduate Certificate	14%
Master's Degree	17%
Doctorate/PhD	1%
Other (Certification, Some university, Some College)	5%
Have you completed any specific career-development-related training programs?	
No	49%
Yes	51%



Table 2 Percentage for all Skill Level Rating (N=179)

Variables	Proportion
Please rate your perception of the skill level of the average career development service provider in BC	
Very unskilled	0%
Somewhat unskilled	13%
Somewhat skilled	62%
Very skilled	25%
Please rate your perception of your own skill level as a career development service provider	
Very unskilled	2%
Somewhat unskilled	7%
Somewhat skilled	45%
Very skilled	46%

Practitioners also listed the groups that they worked with; they were able to select all populations that they served, regardless of the percentage of time that they worked with each client group. The fewest practitioners selected that they work with veterans (60), refugees (69) and people from rural, remote, and northern communities (98). The most worked with populations were women (148), persons with disabilities (144), and Indigenous peoples (144).

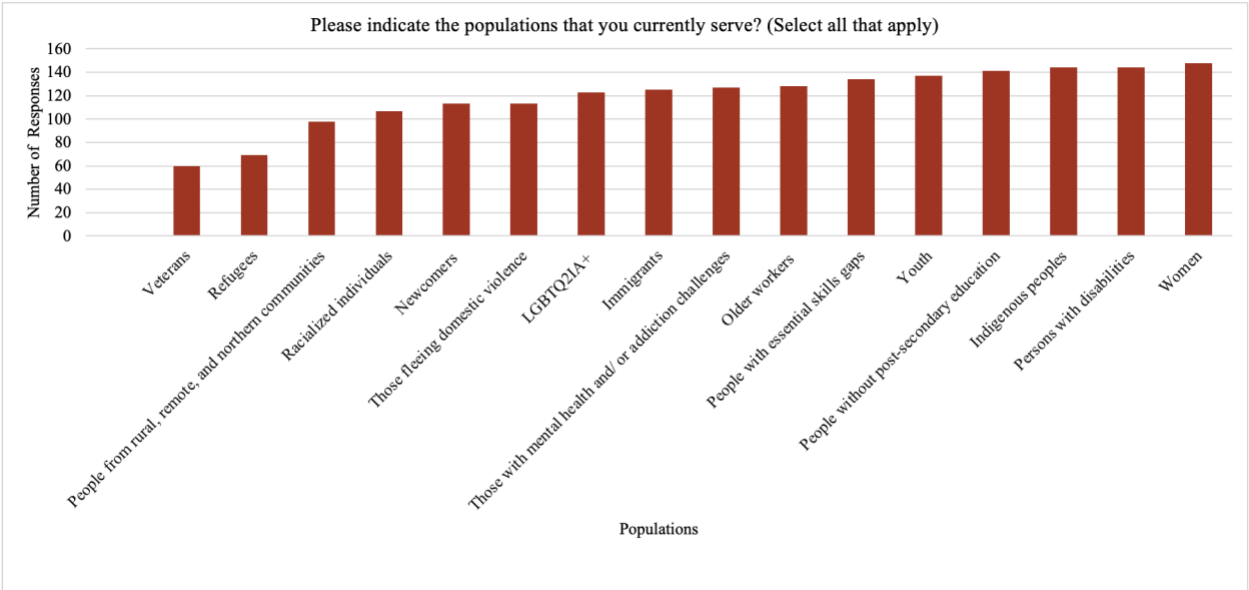


Figure 1 What populations do CDPs currently serve

When asked what prevented career development practitioners from gaining more training in their area, they answered most commonly with “lack of personal funds” and “heavy workload,” followed closely by “employer training budget limitations,” “no time,” and “staff replacement /



back-up issues.” The reasons for the lack of ongoing professional development for this group clustered primarily into two categories - time (at work and in other life roles) and money (personal and organizational). Very few respondents reported a lack of interest, motivation, or engagement in professional development, regulatory or contractual restrictions regarding professional development funding, or lack of relevant training resources.

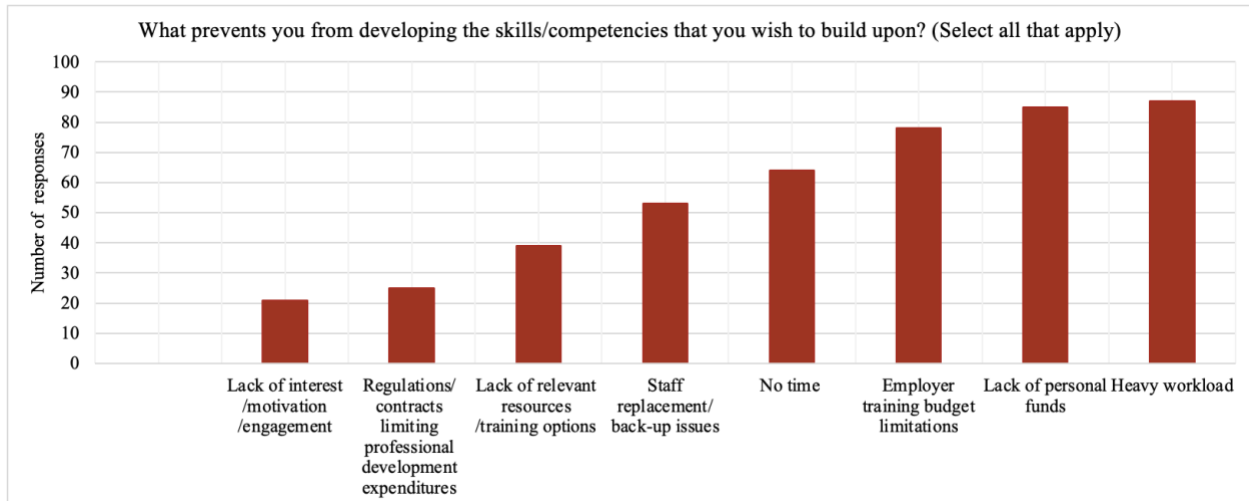


Figure 2 What prevents CDP's from developing skills/competencies

When asked how they develop skills in their role, they most commonly answered with webinars and in-house training, followed closely by public workshops and seminars, conferences, facilitated online courses, and workplace-based courses/workshops.

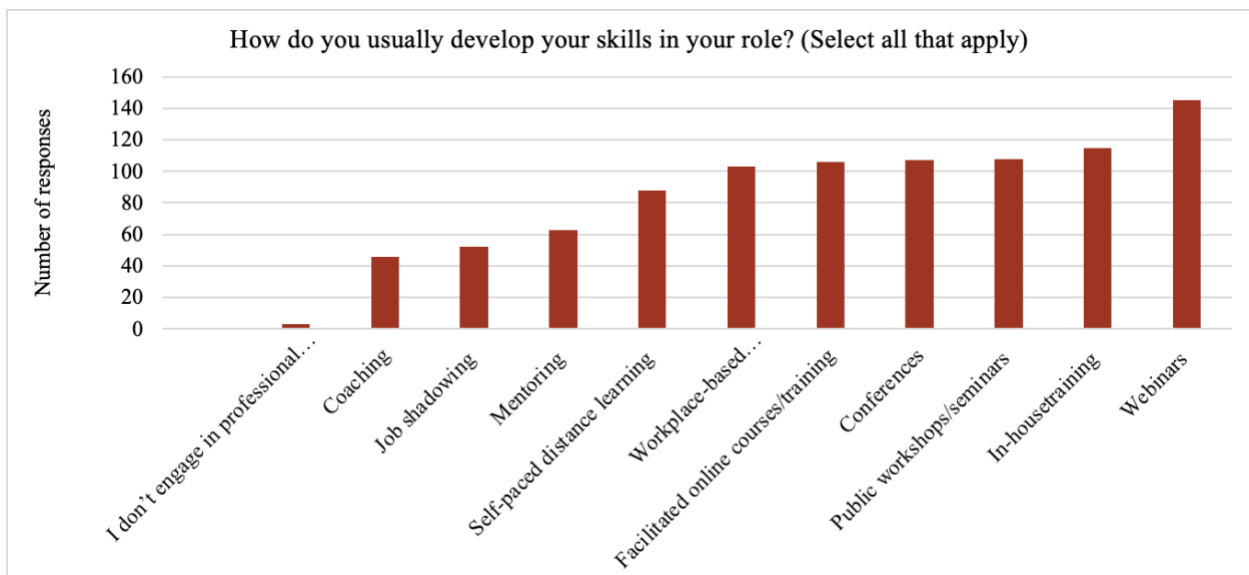


Figure 3 How CDPs develop their skills

Referring to the same competencies used to craft the survey questions, we asked participants to identify the 5 – 10 competencies most important to perform their roles effectively. The most



common answers were “Communicate in a clear and effective manner” and “Nurture a collaborative and trusting relationship.”

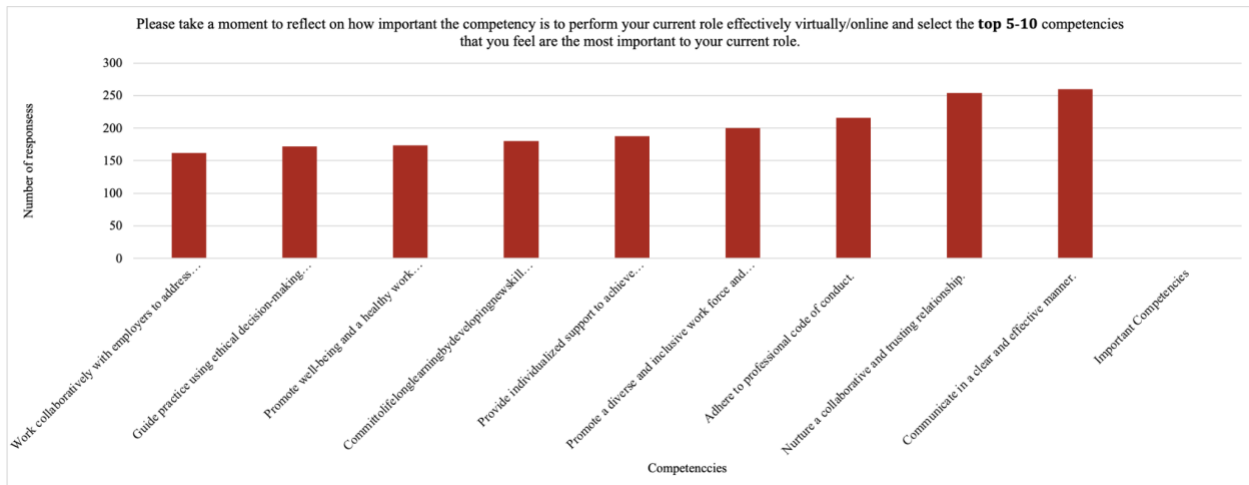


Figure 4 Competencies CDPs find most important for virtual service delivery/work

We also asked which of the competencies they wished they had more training in. The most common answer by far was “Leverage current and emerging technologies to support career development practice,” followed by “Develop tailored approaches for client populations.” Interestingly, as far back as the 2012 revisions to the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners, this focus on the need for additional competencies in integrating technologies and working with diverse populations has been prioritized (CCDF, 2012).

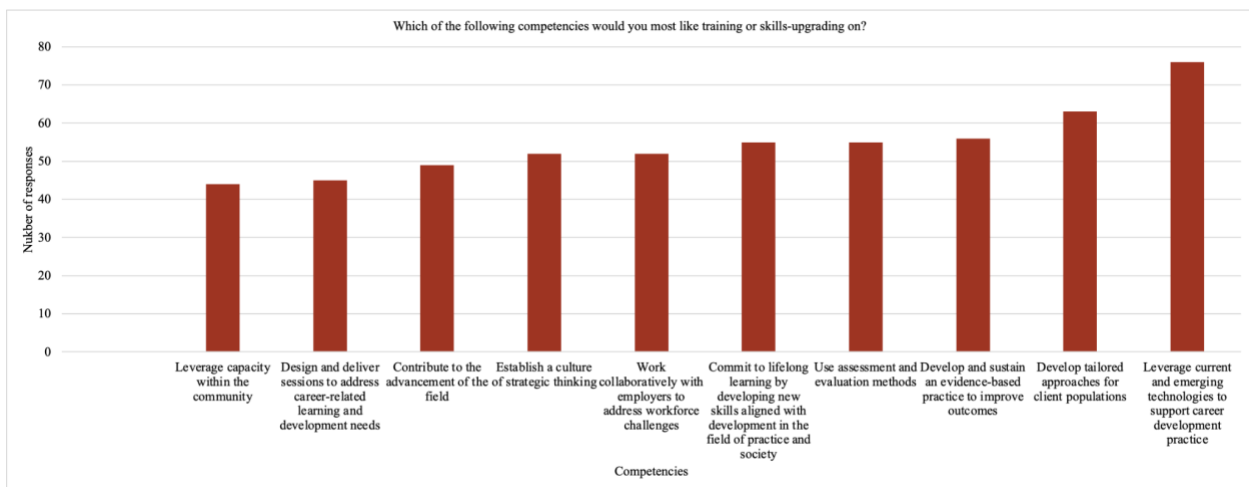


Figure 5 Competencies for which CDPs want training or skills-upgrading



Inferential Statistics

The variables age, years worked in the sector, level of education, career development courses taken, gender, and level of confidence in oneself and other CDPs were compared with average Likert-score on questions about how the move to online felt, ranging from much easier to much harder (see Figure 8 and 9 for specific questions). Age was the only variable to both pass assumptions and have a p-value of less than 0.05. A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of age on Likert score for age ranges 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, and 65+. There was a significant effect of age on Likert scale score at the $p < 0.05$ for the 6 conditions [$F(5,173) = 2.427$], $p = 0.037$. Post hoc comparisons using the Least Significant Differences test indicated that the mean score for the 18-24 age group ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.61$) was significantly different than the 55-64 age group ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.59$) and the 65+ age group ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.43$). Effect size indicated that about 6-7 percent of the variance in Likert score is explained by age ($\eta^2 = 0.066$). However, no other age groups significantly differed from one another. Taken together, these results suggest that age does have an effect on how easily career practitioners found the move from in-person to virtual services. The difference between the groups was above and below 3 (No Change), and thus the 18-24 age group found that the move to virtual made things easier overall, and the age groups 55-64 and 65+ found that the move to virtual made things harder overall. The results should be interpreted with caution, however, as the spread of data was large, and the number of respondents in some of the significant age groups was small, as seen in Figure 6. Because of the uncertainty around age, the data was graphed by the proportion of responses, as seen in Figure 7. This shows that most age groups were quite similar in their responses, except for the youngest age group, which deviated from the rest by a large margin. For example, the 18-24 group did not have a single answer in the Much Harder category.



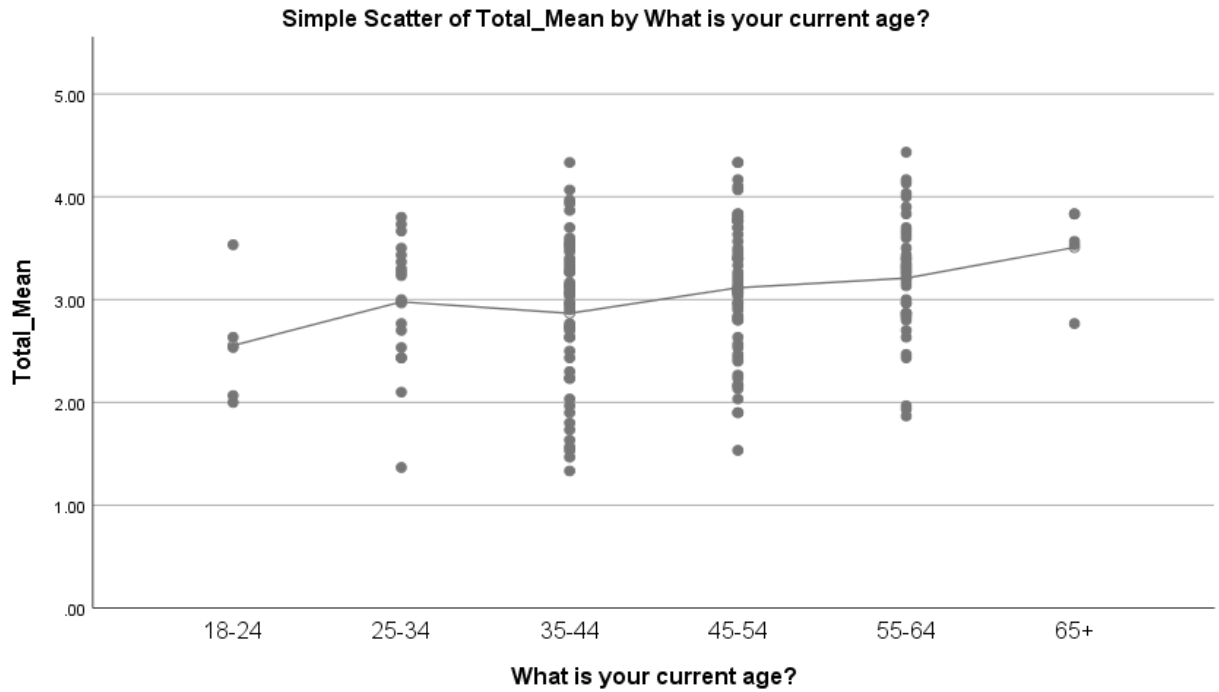


Figure 6 Current Age Likert Scale Means

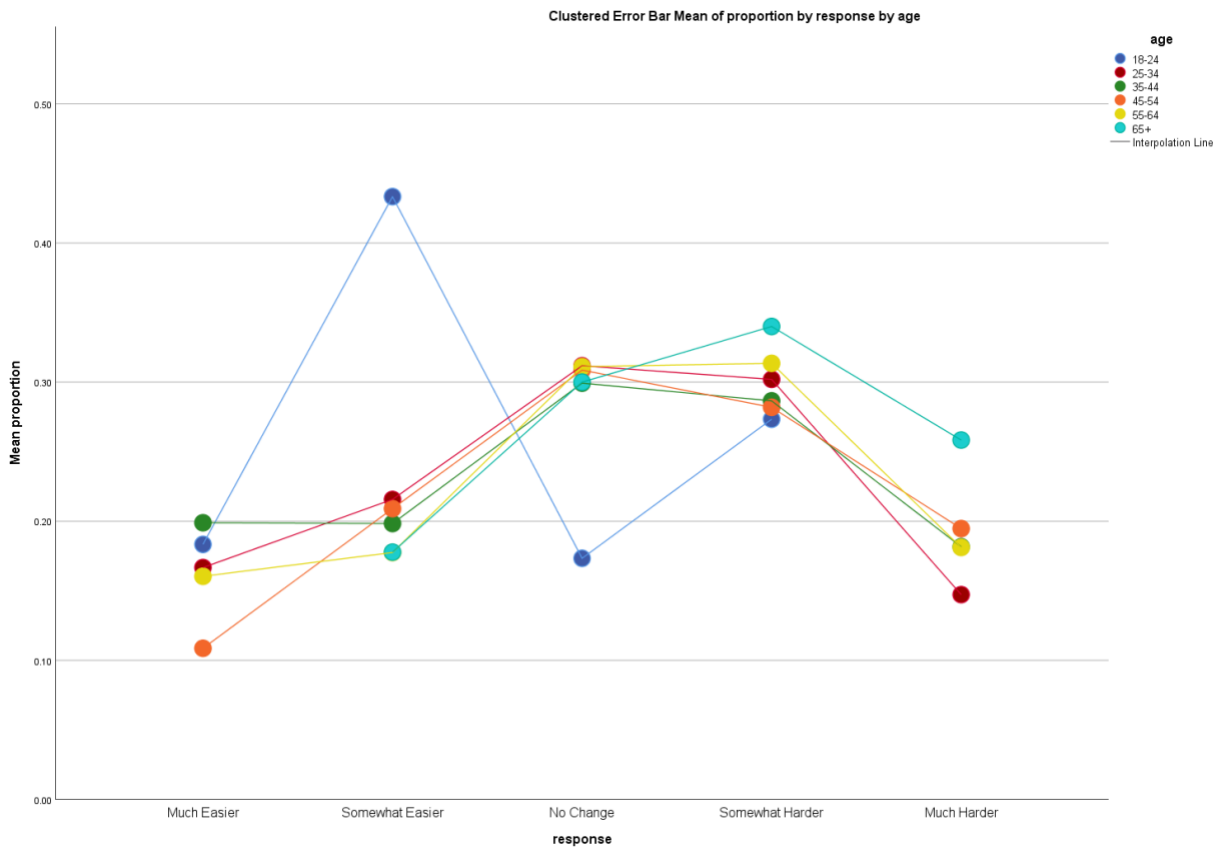


Figure 7 Mean proportion by response by age



The main area of interest is the Likert results themselves. The distribution of responses is somewhat normal, with the mean, median, and mode all at approximately 3.00 (M = 3.049, SD = 0.67). However, while the modal response was 3, the next common response was much more often 4 than 2, showing a trend towards more difficult. Each question that we asked garnered at least some responses that indicated things became more difficult since moving to virtual and at least some responses that indicated things became easier since moving to virtual. Below we report the results; Figure 8 and Figure 9 show the results of the Likert questions, ordered by greatest frequency of “Harder” responses to least frequency of “Harder” responses. Due to the existence of No Change and Not Applicable, the “Easier” frequencies do not mirror the “Harder” frequencies. Not Applicable is white space.

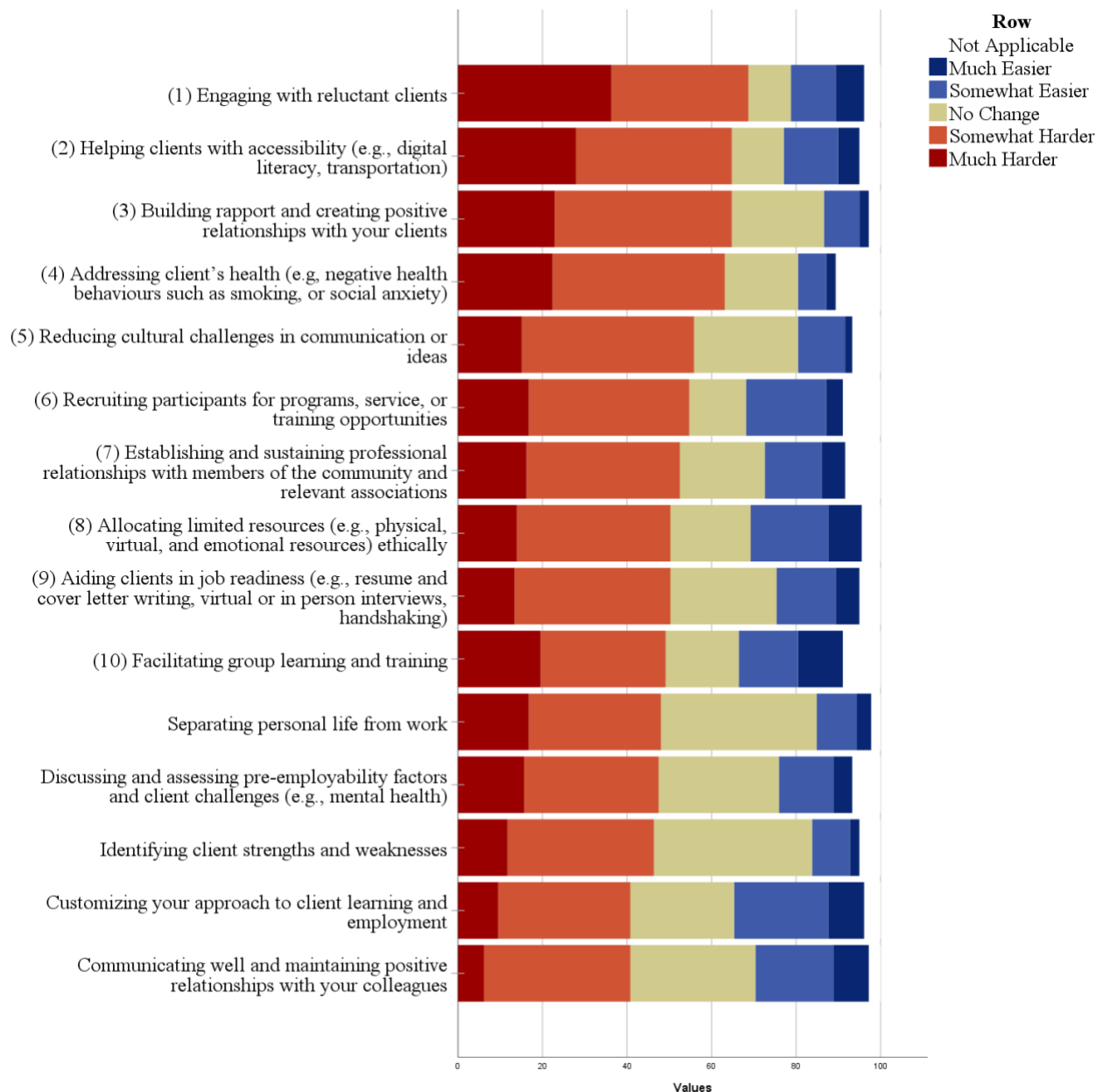


Figure 8 Likert Scale Responses: 15 Greatest Harder Responses



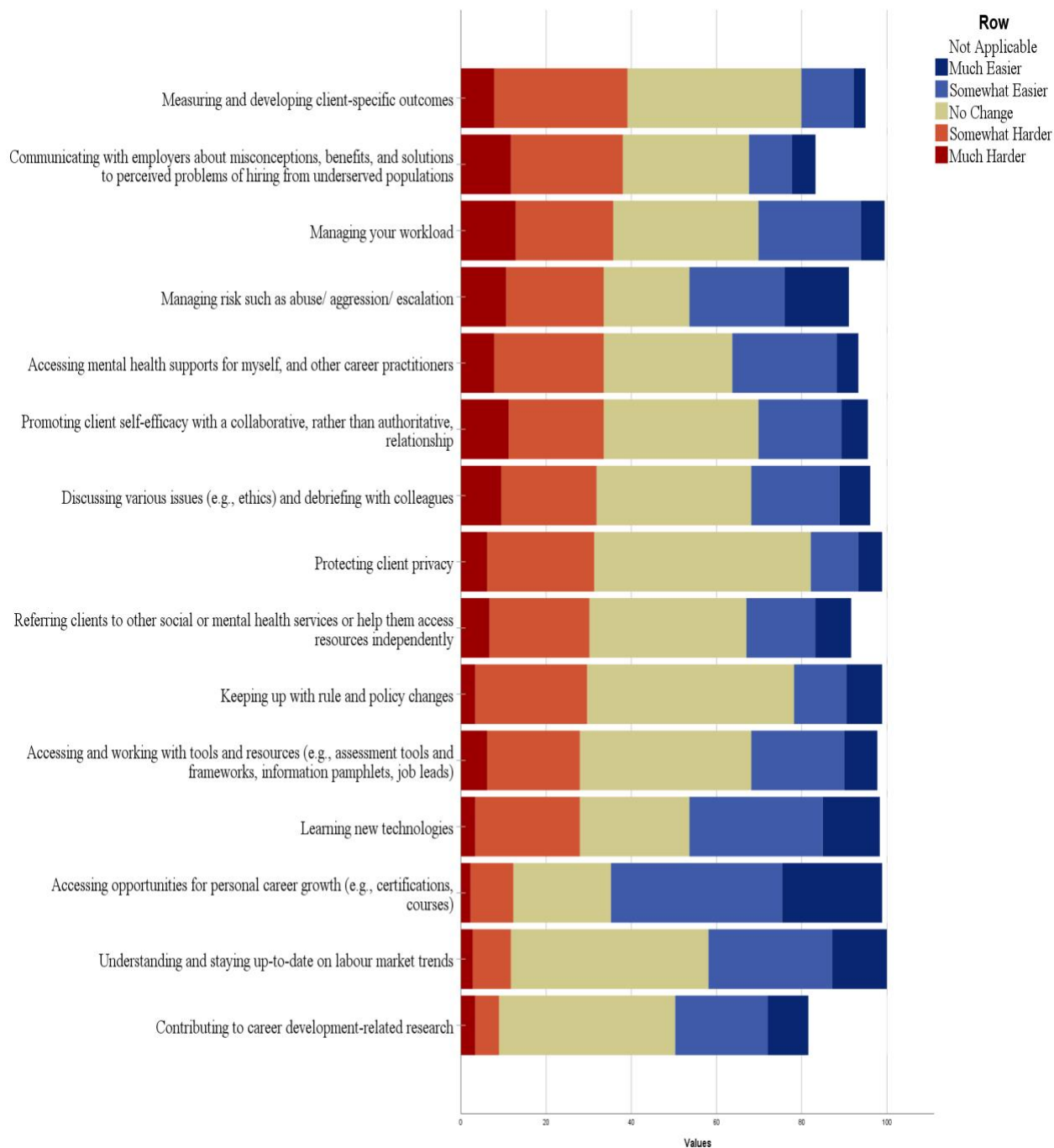


Figure 9 Likert Scale Responses: 15 Fewest Harder Responses

The results of the graphs above support the previously published research summarized in the literature review; of the top 10 items most commonly perceived as more difficult since the move to virtual services, four (Engaging with reluctant clients; Building rapport and creating positive relationships with your clients, addressing clients health; Reducing cultural challenges in communication or ideas) are directly related to the necessity of having good virtual communication and relationship skills. This suggests that more training should be provided for



CDPs on communication and relationship-building skills through a virtual platform. As well, two (Helping clients with accessibility and; Aiding clients in job readiness) of the statements in the survey support the literature's suggestions of general difficulties in moving to the virtual sphere. Helping clients with their own digital literacy skills and facilitating clients' job readiness is simply more difficult to do without a physical, in-person, hands-on approach. Something that was not identified in the literature, however, was that recruitment and engagement from clients would be a larger challenge; responses to two (Recruiting participants for programs, services, or training opportunities; Facilitating group learning and training) of the Likert statements established that recruiting clients for programs, services, group learning, and training is more difficult now than before the move to virtual service delivery. Another area of challenge not determined by the literature was that CDP communication with relevant communities and associations became harder. As further discussion with focus group members later clarified, much of the job placement that occurs is through direct, friendly interactions between a CDP and a leader of an organization, business, or community. Finally, one (Allocating limited resources) of the Likert statements identified that many CDPs found it difficult to allocate limited resources ethically and fairly. This also surfaced in the focus group discussions and will be further examined below; many individuals felt that they had extremely limited resources and could not properly deliver them to the clients.

The results suggest great generalizability, as general education, career development specific education, gender, and years spent in the sector did not predict Likert score for either their total score or the top ten hardest or easiest scales. This suggests that interventions created for CDPs in the move to virtual/hybrid model will help CDPs of all demographics. As well, the symmetry of the data suggests that the field is not in a dire situation, as the most common response was “No Change” since moving to virtual.

Qualitative Analysis: Focus Group and Survey Results

Similar to the survey results focus group findings were fairly generalizable across respondents, regardless of the populations they typically served. Across the focus groups, there was a general consensus of both pros and cons related to virtual service delivery; it both amplified challenges for clients and service providers and created possibilities for growth, innovation, and opportunity. Throughout the conversations, a few recurring themes prevailed: technology, safety and security, geography, relations and rapport, and mental health. The following sections provide a thematic analysis of the focus group conversations, as well as answers to our open-ended question “If you have any other comments, concerns or questions regarding the transition to virtual work please share them here.”



Technology

All focus group participants shared their experiences - both challenges and successes - with increased technology use. As CDPs transitioned into either purely virtual services or a hybrid model (and rarely, sustained their in-person services exclusively), the need for reliable technology such as laptops, cell phones, microphones, camera, and speakers, as well as access to strong Internet connection, increased exponentially.

Challenges

A common thread across all focus groups was that clients, particularly low-income or those residing in rural, remote, or northern communities, faced numerous technology-related challenges. At a basic level, many clients simply did not have access to technology, either at home or within shared spaces that were closed due to the pandemic (e.g., libraries/community centres). With offices closed or limited in their ability to offer in-person services, many individuals could not receive the help they needed. CDPs reported a complex assortment of technical issues encountered by their clients, including lack of ownership or access to smartphones, computers, Internet, cellular service, data plans for mobile phones, and sometimes several of these together. Even when clients obtained access to the equipment and connections that they needed (e.g., a laptop and Internet connection or a smartphone and data plan), many would then face the next barrier in using technology to access career development help: gaps in digital literacy. The learning curve, especially for those unable to get training in using technology, was massive; for some clients, the challenges felt insurmountable. Focus group respondents reported that many of their clients were frustrated to the point of dropping out of programs and services when they struggled to learn the basics of technology use (e.g., meeting on Zoom) or faced connectivity challenges (e.g., dropped calls due to weak Internet connections).

Many focus group participants reported assumptions that shifting to virtual services would be less of an issue for such demographics as youth and others who had already been comfortable working with technology pre-pandemic. However, they found their assumptions shattered at times - although some CDPs found that youth were able to connect with them very easily, with little trouble, others found the opposite:

“I think a major assumption [of serving youth] we make is that they are all tech-savvy and that did not prove to be the case. Some are trying to do things on their mobile devices, their phones, so one of the things we did was offer to lend laptops, right, but the engagement was difficult.”

Although youth do tend to be better with technology than the older generations, respondents reported that, in many cases, this advantage seemed to end with smartphone use. CDPs lamented that youth were lacking skills on computers or laptops and would struggle with basic tasks such as preparing resumes and cover letters. Problems surfaced, for example, when attempting to do basic career-related tasks on a smartphone; the word-processing apps,



keyboards, and resume templates are typically more user-friendly on a laptop or desktop computer. As well, CDPs found that although youth tended to have more general digital literacy, engagement with them through technologies like Zoom was rarely effective; surprisingly, focus group participants, reporting on work with diverse populations, found youth the least likely to engage with virtual services.

In contrast, focus group participants who work with older workers mentioned that those who struggled with technology seemed to create barriers for themselves or perceive barriers to technology that did not exist. The biggest challenge with this group was getting older workers comfortable with the idea of technology and instilling the confidence and problem-solving skills necessary to be successful.

Successes

Focus group participants also reported that there were serendipitous advantages to the shift to virtual service provision. Many found that clients with low digital literacy prior to the pandemic-related shift were forced to learn new technologies and adapt to the changing world. This provided them with essential employability skills that they were able to list on their resume. In fact, many CDPs who served older individuals found that, due to their anxiety about learning new technologies, clients often learned applications such as Zoom so in depth that their knowledge surpassed that of their interviewers, colleagues, or bosses. A similar learning curve was reported by CDPs themselves. Due to the sudden shift to virtual services, and the resulting need to teach a diverse group of individuals about a variety of new technologies, they gained a deep understanding of technology now used throughout the employment sector.

Safety and Security

With the increase in virtual services came to some reluctance from clients who were concerned about the safety and security of their virtual presence. Many clients were reluctant to turn their video on or to have their sessions recorded. Focus group participants explained that many clients were anxious about the possibility of videos or images of themselves being posted on websites or somebody using their likeness in other virtual settings. Although many clients became more comfortable in using the virtual services after security and privacy features were explained, and they learned about the precautions their service providers took in handling their personal data and recordings, others still expressed concern, skepticism, and anxiety about sharing personal information online.

One focus group that identified safety and security as an even larger challenge comprised CDPs working with individuals fleeing violence. Not only did their pre-pandemic in-person meetings with their clients provide a physically safe space and positive interactions outside the individual's home, but in-office meetings prevented abusers from fully monitoring them and also provided more opportunities for clients to get help from others. When services shifted to virtual options only, the participants of this focus group reported that, for some women, the change was detrimental, potentially providing abusers with access to all correspondence between the client



and the CDP (e.g., emails, text and phone records) as well as browser search histories if the individual was looking up resources or recommendations from the service provider; some focus group participants expressed concerns about abusers using apps that logged everything on the home computer. Most concerning for CDPs was the lack of privacy and safety for their clients while at home; since moving to virtual services, many reported that some women would refuse to turn their cameras on; others would keep glancing at areas beyond the camera's reach, implying a hidden figure somewhere in the room, watching and listening in.

Across the focus groups, several CDPs expressed safety concerns about post-pandemic times when in-person services would increase; their concerns were wide-ranging, including anxiety about an anticipated increase in the number of individuals coming in under the influence of drugs or alcohol or individuals causing disturbances by refusing to acknowledge rules put in place, such as mask wearing. CDPs surfaced concerns both about working virtually and returning to in-person services.

Geography

British Columbia is a vast province with pockets of highly dense cities; because of the density differences within such a massive land area, survey and focus group respondents reported diverse experiences with geographical challenges. For example, one CDP who provided services in remote and rural coastal areas expressed concern over the success rate of that region being tied intrinsically to geographic constraints, reporting that one client had to take a water taxi to access funded training - an expensive and time-consuming trip, taking 2 hours each way. Although, in this case, the travel expenses were covered by the funder, the client's time was not similarly reimbursed; attending the training cost the client 4 additional hours each day away from family and other responsibilities when compared with clients who lived closer to a training centre. Focus group participants confirmed that it was not always possible to cover high travel costs for rural and remote clients or some eligible clients were not able to be away from their homes and communities for extended periods of time to attend training; challenges related to geography impact many rural and remote clients and service providers quite differently from those living in an urban centre such as Vancouver. Although on the surface, it may appear that virtual employment services and access to online training could offer a solution to these challenges, that was not always the case. Several focus group participants from rural and remote communities reported limited or non-existent access to Internet, cellular service, or computer devices for many of their clients.

However, the advent of virtual service delivery did provide some geographic benefits. Focus group participants reported that many individuals with access to adequate technology and Internet connection appreciated the opportunity to access services from their homes, avoiding time-consuming and costly trips to the CDP's office. This applied both to individuals in rural and remote communities, and to those who lived within a city. As one CDP remarked:



“it's interesting because we actually did get a fair bit of people that would be going into some of our cohort programming that we might not otherwise see, because all of sudden they were able to take it virtually rather than having to try and figure out a way to get to [the city they offer their programming in] from living up in like [a farther away city] or something like that”

CDPs were also able to increase the geographic reach of their services, connecting with some individuals who would have otherwise not been served:

“Pros and cons with it for our program. It did make our services more accessible, geographically, because we operate out of [local cities], we were able to accept participants from other regions ... so, that was a good thing in that sense.”

Most focus group members provided a similar response: virtual service delivery increased the number of individuals they were able to connect with, both by eliminating the travel costs (time and money related), and by opening up their geographic limitations, as well as reaching areas that were previously outside of their service area. Another noted positive of virtual services was easier access to other resources, or professionals from around the province, country, or globe that could now connect to their courses and deliver guest lectures or training sessions, despite their location. This increase in access to experts came without the financial costs of bringing them into individual service locations. However, they also noted that these pros were not the case in many rural and remote regions with inadequate, inconsistent access to Internet or cellular services, or for those who could not access or use a computer properly.

Relations and Rapport

There were conflicting opinions on how virtual services lend themselves to creating positive relationships and building rapport with their clients. Some, such as the participant below, found virtual services to be beneficial for creating and maintaining bonds with clients due to increased ease and frequency of contact.

“...the good side of the whole virtual service is that I noticed that I created, I dare to say, quite a strong bond with my clients. It feels like they are more in arms reach. Before it was an email, “Let’s schedule an appointment.” A phone call, “when are you available?,” and then you wait for that day to talk to them. Now that we don’t know when we’ll be able to see each other again it’s a phone call and we talk about everything. Meet me on Zoom, and we talk about everything. Today, or tomorrow. It became a closer connection, I think. Yeah, it was bittersweet. There’s the good and the bad.”



In response, another participant in the same focus group (i.e., those who work with immigrants) echoed the ease of timely connection that virtual and virtual service brings. However, they expanded to touch on a point that was made in all focus groups, that telecommunication, even with virtual video, made it difficult to read client's non-verbal cues and body language.

“Of course, it's easier just to hop on the phone, or get on a kind of video conference. But on the other side, I think the challenge is you lose some of the message delivered from the communication, because you only see the headshots, right? The whole body language is invisible. So, some of the gestures, or some of the non-verbal cues, it's impossible for you to observe. So, that's the challenge part.”

The lack of body language visible through virtual communication comes with challenges. Other focus groups noted these challenges and noted that it was more difficult to see clients' emotional responses. For example, it was more difficult to see shaking hands or nervous fidgeting which may be indicative of anxiousness. Body language became a focus of many of our conversations, noting that these non-verbal cues are especially important to service clients with barriers such as disabilities, language barriers, or those in dangerous home situations.

To mitigate the level of communication that was lost with virtual services, some participants noted that they needed to become over-animated and elevate their expressions to make sure their welcoming nature translated through the screen. They increased the use of inflection and animation in their voice and made bigger arm gestures to indicate their enthusiasm and connection. Despite actively trying to reduce any amount of lost connection, some found that the learning experience was just not the same.

“However, in the absence of our in-person services, we felt that as much as we tried, the learning experience was not to the same effect as it would have been in-person, especially for the participants in need of developing social skills, soft skills, and confidence-building. So, there was a huge disadvantage, so in a nutshell I can't tell if it works for us or not, it's a bit of a complicated question [...]”

The participant above voices concern that virtual services are not adequate for developing soft skills, social skills, and confidence-building. This participant calls virtual service delivery a big disadvantage for creating those skills and acknowledges the potential downfalls of virtual service delivery. As identified in both the literature and the survey, increased training on tele-therapy skills is needed to provide clients with the help they need, and CDPs with the confidence and skills they need. A common claim heard throughout the focus groups was that specific training (in most cases, motivational interviewing) was one of the most helpful trainings received prior to the pandemic that was also useful for virtual services. Overall, those represented in the survey and focus groups struggled with creating connections through virtual settings and missed the community that pre-pandemic, in-person services brought.



Mental Health

Many CDPs acknowledged that a lot of their appointments with clients were often focused on mental health, rather than the typical areas of career development:

“I noticed that a lot of my appointments turned into check-ins on mental health and wellbeing, a lot of clients didn’t understand what was going on. Not just with the pandemic, but why they couldn’t come into the office, why things all of a sudden had to change, why a lot of their support workers were no longer able to come to their homes. And some of them had that explained to them, but a lot of people who didn’t have that extra support, that kind of fall through the cracks a bit, they had no clue. And I had a lot of calls where my ASIST training, the suicide prevention training, really came in handy. And I’m still dealing with a lot of those conversations. So, that’s something I’ve noticed a lot.”

As well, the mental health crisis has hit career practitioners themselves. A consistent finding across focus groups was that a large increase in workload and urgent learning (navigating virtual technologies, learning how to perform their job on video conferencing software, and teaching diverse individuals with various competencies these new methods of communication and career navigation) was given to CDPs at the beginning of the pandemic. As two participants noted:

“I found this whole process exhausting. You're learning so much, you're doing what you used to do, and putting more in there and being virtual for hours a day is very tiring and then you've got a pandemic and family members that are dealing with all those issues and it's been a rough time.”

“We were told to work at 150% when COVID hit, and then told once again to work at 150% now that we are going offline. We can’t work at 150% forever, and many of our members are experiencing burnout.”

It was expressed in multiple focus groups that many of their colleagues - and often the participants themselves - were looking to transition to a different career due to the workload, work-life balance, and Zoom fatigue. Although the number of clients that CDPs had during the pandemic may have declined, another participant mentioned that the intensity of these sessions and the interactions with their clients were elevated. Many more clients were experiencing mental health issues or other barriers to employment and required more time and effort. In thinking about the future of career development, mental health is at the center of discussions, both for clients and CDPs.



Moving Forward: Future Worries and Supports

In each focus group, we asked participants their opinions on how their organization will be structuring their service provision in the future, whether majority in-person, virtual, or a hybrid model. Although there was a difference in personal preference for the continuation of services, many acknowledged the need to both meet clients where they are and balance their needs and wants. One participant noted that:

“In terms of virtual services, I think it's important to also recognize that just because a client wants to meet virtually doesn't mean that is in their best interest in terms of engagement and connection. Sometimes it's just easier, not better.”

As most CDPs and organizations hope to keep at least a portion of their service delivery virtual, it is both relevant and timely to acknowledge their concerns in transitioning to a hybrid model, their lingering concerns about virtual delivery, the support they still need, and what solutions they have already tried and tested. Many of CDPs worry for the future of hybrid delivery centred on their clients' wellbeing. Some material concerns, as discussed above, were concerns over access to technologies and access to safe spaces for clients to participate in training and work. Some in-person concerns were over the health and safety of their staff and clients with changing variants. Particularly staff and clients that are vulnerable to sicknesses, such as older workers or those with disabilities.

At the end of each focus group, participants were asked if they had any specific worries about the future, whether it pertained to virtual service delivery, in-person services, or anything else. This resulted in large discussions, and the researchers were able to identify numerous areas of future worry. Below, worries are partitioned into four general categories.

General Worries

Many CDPs expressed a common worry that was always at the forefront of their minds: an increased workload. This revolved around a few main areas of anxiety. First, while most CDPs agreed that a hybrid model was the best method of service delivery in the future, they were hesitant about what that could look like. Will WorkBC acknowledge that even if some individuals prefer virtual services, the caseload for each CDP should stay the same? In other words, will virtual meetings be considered equal to in-person meetings? As well, with the influx of individuals wanting to work again - both because of vaccination efficacy and because many will have finished with their financial assistance from the government - will the workload become overwhelming? CDPs voiced concern that there will be many colleagues that will experience burnout, ultimately going on leave or changing careers, leaving even more workload for other CDPs. More generally, CDPs were also worried about what a hybrid model will look like and what that meant for them and their clients. So far, WorkBC has remained quiet about future service delivery methods. They worry the WorkBC will focus its measure of success and funding on intake numbers without considering the increase in support that clients may need. Finally, CDPs were worried about mental health issues and burnout for their clients.



In-Person Services Re-Opening

Along with a hybrid model comes in-person services; as BC opens back up, in-person services will continue to climb. Many CDPs acknowledged that they were worried about Covid-19 and the transmission of the virus with the increased contact that comes with in-person interactions. Worries pertained to the grey area of enforcing protections, such as mask-wearing, with individuals coming in. As well, CDPs identified that there hasn't been a need for physical safety during virtual services, but that this might become an issue with the increase in individuals coming in for help and how that interacts with the increases in substance abuse in the population. Most CDPs, however, felt that these protections would come naturally. However, they were worried about other areas of in-person services. Namely, they were worried that their people skills would have suffered from the little interaction that they had with people throughout the pandemic. Perhaps the biggest worry, however, was that the skills that they garnered throughout the pandemic would be forgotten; CDPs want to continue the positives and mitigate the negatives on virtual service delivery.

Job Market

Some worries that CDPs have centred on the future of the labour market. The unknown economic and labour changes make it difficult for CDPs to plan for the future. As the gig economy increases, CDPs worry about finding sustainable jobs for clients. They worry about changes that may make clients unprepared to return to work, whether it is changing required credentials or required courses for training and work opportunities. CDPs are worried about clients keeping up with changing interview or recruitment styles, which are more and more often in a virtual or virtual setting. Interviews that include pre-recorded videos or an interviewing style with a bot instead of another human being may be increasingly difficult for clients who are still learning and becoming comfortable with their virtual skills. It also creates more barriers for those who are anxious around technology or lack access to technology.

Practical Worries

Other practical worries regarded the lack of trained staff available to hire, as many retired or switched jobs over the COVID-19 pandemic. They worry about creating equitable access for clients who are not interested or are having trouble learning technology. CDPs also have worries about clients with multiple barriers to accessing training and employment. They worried that clients may not have the materials they need to access services, such as a BCeID or Service Card. Many were worried about helping clients who were not motivated to find employment but are required to search due to employment assistance requirements. They also worry about clients going back to work and finding available and open child-care options. Lastly, they shared worries about finding opportunities for clients who may not fit into the necessary conditions for various training, funding, or support opportunities. They worry that strict guidelines may alienate clients who also need support.



There were also worries about obtaining continued support and funding from government organizations. They worry about finding staff with the necessary skills to aid clients in a changing world. Those in management roles also worried about appeasing staff members who may have their own worries around new transitions back to in-person or hybrid services.

“I’m not as worried about the clients, the clients are coming through the door, and we’re happy to help them. I think it’s supporting our staff, who have worked tirelessly through this pandemic. They have not had time off. They are exhausted. And now we’re going to be going into our busiest time with clients, and our doors are open, and we’re expecting our staff to really step it up. So, that to me, I think, is my biggest worry, in terms of being able to make sure that our staff are healthy, that they’re taking care of themselves, that as an organization we’re taking care of them and that they are able to take care of our clients. That to me is the bigger piece, there is [sic] a lot of folks who are going to be coming back who are super desperate, who are facing barriers to employment, who have been off for a really long time, are super stressed, facing a significant amount of anxiety but so have our staff.”

Focus groups participants were asked to share some support that they thought may be helpful for themselves, their clients or their organizations as they looked forward to an ever-changing sector and potential hybrid service delivery. These suggestions included more training opportunities on professional interviewing, crisis intervention, suicide prevention and intervention, advanced communication skills, cultural sensitivity, and dealing with burnout. Keeping in mind the top two reasons that CDPs do not take training opportunities are lack of personal funds and heavy workload when designing and delivering these courses.

CDPs also noted a need for sustainability and long-term contracts for both their WorkBC contracts and other funding opportunities. Citing that the precariousness of short-term funding or continually decreasing funding makes it difficult to plan for the future and ultimately for their clients. It also makes it difficult to plan for staffing needs or to recruit or retain staff. Guidelines around reporting deadlines for clients

Globally, COVID-19 has brought about an increase in the number of individuals suffering from mental health issues - such as anxiety and depression (Abbott, 2021). Less diagnostically, people are reporting difficulty with sleeping and eating, increased alcohol consumption or substance use, and worsening chronic conditions (Panchal et al, 2021). Research has found that there have been increased rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts (Khan et al., 2020). This has put an unprecedented strain on existing mental health services and presupposes that in order for career practitioners to perform their main tasks of helping individuals obtain skills to secure a job, they must be able to forge a relationship in spite of these increased challenges. With consideration to the mental health crisis, the client-practitioner relationship is facilitated not simply by means of being nice but rather must be accomplished through – and is dependent upon - therapeutic methods, including active listening skills, reframing, and motivational interviewing. Mental health and illness is part of career development, where CDPs address and



support emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being (Redekopp et al., 2020).

Suggested supports regarding mental health included building time into schedules for decompression and reducing workload by focusing on clients instead of tracking clients through tedious paperwork, Integrated Case Management (ICM) which would lessen the time spent contacting clients to gather and log surface-level information and increase time for creating meaningful relationships and performing other essential work-related tasks. Additionally, to save time training new practitioners, CDPs noted that integrating ICM training into BC's post-secondary career development course would be extremely beneficial both for organizations and students themselves.

On a macro-provincial scale, every focus group suggested that governments look towards continued efforts to provide every person with access to proper technology (laptops, cell phones, video cameras, microphones, etc.) and strong and stable wireless internet. This sentiment was particularly emphasized for those in rural, remote, northern and Indigenous locals. Some also noted that an increase in local partnerships with organizations outside of career development might be useful. For example, one CDP mentioned a program that partnered with a nearby glasses shop to provide low-cost glasses for clients in need. Many others echoed the need for this type of community collaboration and outreach.

Based on our survey data and discussions, the intersectionality of social support and client barriers leaves room for other suggestions, such as improved access to timely and reliable transportation. Overall increases in not only the number of mental health services offered but partnered with a decrease in wait times to access services both for clients and CDPs themselves.

Moving Forward: Potential Solutions

Along with challenges and suggestions for support, CDPs shared the techniques that have helped them throughout virtual service delivery. Many of these suggestions were welcomed by the other practitioners in our focus groups, who shared tips, techniques, and resources with each other. These included using increased marketing and social media presence for recruitment purposes. Also, making information about facilitators public through websites, or social media, so that clients have a chance to see who they may be working with. To help create engagement, practitioners would share facts and information about themselves with clients, talking about hobbies, or life outside of work. Some practitioners said they helped mitigate the lack of connection that may occur virtually by making sure to spend time logging on to meetings and sessions early to chat with participants or taking the time to chat one-on-one or in breakout rooms during and after training sessions. Some met clients for a virtual coffee talk or moved slower than normal throughout recruitment and intake processes to ensure clients were supported in the ways that they needed most. The use of virtual breakout rooms was also a commonly shared technique to help clients connect with each other.



Practitioners shared other techniques to connect and work with clients where they were at. Whether that meant creating lending libraries for technologies, offering internet packages to clients who needed them, or going so far as paying for a hotel for a client to stay in and have a quiet place to complete their training and work, or paying participants to attend various programs and training opportunities. Many offered solutions to virtual forms and signatures by having participants do a distanced pick-up of printed packages for intake or training. They also offered workshops, or “cheat sheets” for common technological applications or programs that staff and clients would be engaging with. One practitioner stressed the importance of speaking to clients clearly about what skills they were gaining through learning technology or going through virtual training sessions. Spelling out the skills that clients could put on their resumes post-training opportunities helped to ground the experience they were gaining and motivate them to continue.

To ease clients, some practitioners made sure to address the strange nature of the pandemic, preemptively giving them resources and information about common signs of mental health issues or mental health resources. Some made sure to set up counselling sessions offered through WorkBC as a first priority. In order to help CDPs with their mental health, some practitioners in management roles suggested giving employees flexibility in their roles, with casual days here and there for mental health or other personal reasons. Another positive solution is that post-secondary institutions themselves pivoted to virtual learning opportunities, which helped both CDPs and their clients access the courses or accreditations they needed. Results from both the survey and the focus groups suggest that a top barrier to accessing training is cost, and thus there is support needed from governmental and governing institutions both in providing low-cost training and subsidizing that cost.

Moving Forward: Additional Research

While our research provides some recommendations for mitigating and overcoming challenges related to virtual CDP work, other literature suggests similar solutions. One of these solutions is to create an influx of budget allocation for professional development opportunities that focuses on incoming challenges to career professionals, including the increase of virtual services and the influx of new clients facing barriers (CERIC, 2020). OCED (2020) suggests that moving forward, solutions should focus on short-term mobility to virtual, and there should be a plan for medium- and long-term strategies as well. This includes an understanding of how to structure operating models to make gradual changes as needs shift (OCED, 2020). The connection to other stakeholders and partners will be a key component in proactive CDP strategies in the post-pandemic world (OCED, 2020).

Other research points to the usefulness of virtual, anonymous discussion forums as a way to engage learners in career development services (In press source). The use of these forums may be helpful for career courses in massive open virtual courses (MOOCs), which have not yet been heavily adopted (In press source) but could be a potential solution for CDP upskilling and delivering learning opportunities to clients. Concerns that virtual learning is not adequate may be



mitigated using anonymous virtual discussion forums (In press source). Some combination and trial and error of the above suggestions may help CDPs and their clients with the future of career development, whether in-person, virtual or hybrid service delivery. Further research and testing are needed to evaluate the impact of these suggestions. As we move toward more in-person interactions, further research is needed to explore how work structures change for CDPs, particularly how hybrid models of work may impact CDP service delivery.

Finally, we would like to suggest an overarching theme to use as one contemplates the above suggestions. Recent research suggests that people tend to provide additive solutions to problems when subtractive solutions can yield greater benefits (Adams et al., 2021). As an example, most of our solutions above are additive, yet CDPs identified that one of the greatest benefits to moving virtual amidst the pandemic was that the bureaucratic oversight was greatly lessened, allowing the practitioners to work much more efficiently and spend more time with their clients. Providing exclusively additive solutions does little to alleviate concerns around burnout, client and practitioner mental health, and workload.

Moving Forward: Increasing CDP Competency

The continuing impact of this research is its role in informing work being undertaken by ASPECT BC and its project partner, ETHOS Career Management Group, to create and test educational interventions to address some of the gaps in online competencies. Recommendations and interventions were taken back to the Virtual Learning Consortium (VLC) for review and testing to ensure that, moving forward, the needs of CDPs are addressed in this community-based project. This research informs the pathway for educational intervention to mitigate the challenges that CDPs and their clients face in the virtual world. It is likely that virtual career development services will continue in some way well after the end of the pandemic, and the goal of this research is to ensure that CDPs are able to meet the changing workforce development landscape.

Because the research identified lack of time and funding for CDPs to increase their skills, the sample educational intervention is tasked to:

1. Be aligned with the 26 competencies from the Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals.
2. Be easy to use and be low threshold for users, i.e., intuitive, easy to access, follow best practices in adult education, and inexpensive.
3. Incorporate multi-media learning resources to accommodate different learning styles.
4. Follow a pathway to building competencies that can be used by those entering the field of career development and those who are veterans of the field.
5. Built to include learning assessment
6. Include CPUs toward professional credentials or micro-credentials.



As the final part of this research project, ETHOS Career Management Group created this learning portal. A demonstration of which can be found at <https://aspect.ethoscmg.com/assess-effectiveness/>.

As a part of this project's knowledge mobilization efforts, this learning intervention framework was presented at the ASPECT Conference in November 2021 and the Cannexus Conference in January 2022 to much enthusiasm and excitement of CDPs in attendance. Their response was indicative of the sector's interest in developing their virtual career development skills.

Recommendations

The research has focused on challenges related to virtual career development practice for CDPs and their clients and communities. From our research emerged the following recommendations:

Invest in Upskilling Career Development Practitioners

CDPs need to upskill to meet the needs of a virtual environment. Further develop a learning pathway for career development practitioners to increase their competencies to address their digital skills, support their clients' digital skills, and manage the complexity of career development practice when working with barriered and underrepresented groups in employment.

Virtual Career Development Practice Must Consider Rural, Remote, and Underrepresented Client Needs

Employment program funders should be aware that any implementation of online employment services should remain community-based, particularly for low-income, rural, remote, and northern communities and those with barriers to employment. Access to technology, digital literacy, and undependable and unaffordable Internet service is a challenge to CDPs and their clients.

Resist the Urge to Create Large Virtual Employment Service Catchments

CDPs are experts on the ground who can see the unique conditions of the labour market from both the supply and demand sides: creating large virtual catchment areas undermines these connections. CDPs help their clients by connecting them to employment, training, and wrap-around services. They are essential to their communities, building relationships with employers, employees, training service providers and institutions, and local economic development groups.



Conclusion

If career development practitioners are to help their clients navigate a virtual world, they must first learn how to navigate it themselves. But the role of the CDP is complex, and the long-term effects of the pandemic and the quickly changing labour market. The sector must take both in-person and virtual approaches to meet the needs of those entering the workforce, upskilling and transitioning to new positions, and navigating in-demand learning. In this research, we identified the gaps in CDP's abilities to embrace virtual services noting how these gaps might create barriers for their clients.

In this research, we investigated the competencies needed for virtual services by CDPs. We learned that training related to adapting to new technologies, providing safety and security to clients, finding solutions to geographical challenges, building rapport with clients, and increasing mental health challenges exacerbate in a virtual environment. Yet, no educational pathway exists to help CDPs navigate this new employment service model.

Our focus group members identified worries and support to help their clients who are underrepresented in the workforce. These include concerns about full virtual services and the increased workload it brings. They worry about losing the skills they developed during the height of the pandemic as the practice moves to in-person services. They are worried that clients already struggling in a virtual setting will be left further behind. They worry that, in a virtual world, both the client's and CDP's mental health will continue to deteriorate.

Although some CDP activities have become easier in a virtual service environment, many have not, and there are currently limited resources available that specifically address virtual practice. Using the 26 CDP competencies (CCDF, 2021) as a framework to identify gaps in learning, the project team applied the findings of this research and designed an educational pathway for CDPs to thrive in a virtual world. This pathway is low barrier, aligns with building competencies for professional practice and provides critically needed opportunities to train new and veteran CDPs. Further investment in building CDP competencies is needed if virtual services are to remain a part of Canada's career development services supporting the country's economic and workforce needs.



Appendices

Appendix A Justification of Data Analysis

Justification of Data Analysis

Likert scales are ordinal data, in that they contain ordered categories, separated by subjective distances between said categories. However, there is considerable debate on exactly how this ordinal data can be treated in data analysis. One side tends to consider that because Likert scales are ordinal, the intervals between each category cannot be considered equal. Therefore, any numerical or arithmetic calculation cannot be applied to the data; analysts from this side suggest that only nonparametric tests should be used on Likert scale data (Jamieson, 2004; Kuzon et al.). The other side argues that, although it is technically true that Likert scale data is ordinal, the data can be considered interval without penalty to accuracy (Carifio & Perla, 2008). Lubke and Muthen (2004) found that as long as certain assumptions are met, then it is permissible to treat Likert scale data as interval data. de Winter & Dodou (2010) found that t-tests were as accurate as Mann-Whitney tests for Likert scale data. Likert scale data with at least 5 or more categories that are considered to have consistent intervals can be considered as continuous, or at least an approximation of continuous data (Johnson & Creech, 1983; Norman, 2010; Sullivan & Artino, 2013; Zumbo & Zimmerman, 1993). Analyses show that parametric tests on Likert scales are more robust than previously thought and can be used without fear of breaking the “laws” of statistics (Norman, 2010; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). Because the data in the current survey research passed the necessary assumptions and contained 5 categories, and also because it is logical to conclude that 4.5 truly does sit in the middle of “Somewhat Harder” and “Much Harder,” we have chosen to analyze the data using the mean, rather than the median or the mode as an “average” score.



Appendix B Online Survey Questions

1. Please indicate below your consent to participate in this survey.

Yes, I consent and would like to continue with the survey.

No, I do not consent and would like to end the survey now.

2. Which of the following best describes your gender identity?

- Woman
- Man
- Non-Binary
- Two-Spirit
- Other

3. What is your current age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

4. In which province/territory do you primarily offer career development services?

- British Columbia
- Alberta
- Saskatchewan
- Manitoba
- Ontario
- Quebec
- New Brunswick
- Newfoundland and Labrador
- Nova Scotia
- Prince Edward Island
- Northwest Territories
- Yukon Territories
- Nunavut
- Other

5. How long have you been employed in the Career Development sector?

- Less than 1 year



- 1-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years

6. What is your highest level of education completed?

- Partial High School
- Complete High School or GED
- College Diploma
- Bachelor's Degree
- Post-Graduate Certificate
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate/PhD
- Other

7. Have you completed any specific career development-related training programs?

(e.g., Douglas College Career Development Practice Certificate, SFU Career Development Practitioner Certificate program, Life Strategies Career Management Professional Program (CMPP))

Yes

No

8. If **Yes**, please specify:

9. Select each relevant credential/certification/designation that you currently hold. (Select all that apply)

- Intend to apply for CDP credential
- BC CCDP (BC Certified Career Development Practitioner)
- CCC (Canadian Certified Counsellor)
- CPHR (Chartered Professional in Human Resources)
- GCDF (Global Career Development Facilitator)
- RCC (Registered Clinical Counsellor)
- RRP (Rehabilitation Professional)
- RVP (Registered Vocational Professional)
- Other

10. Please share your current role or title:

11. Please indicate the population(s) you currently serve? (Select all that apply)



- Immigrants
- Indigenous peoples
- LGBTQ2IA+
- Newcomers
- Older workers
- Persons with disabilities
- People from rural, remote, and northern communities
- People with essential skills gaps
- People without post-secondary education
- Racialized individuals
- Refugees
- Those fleeing domestic violence
- Those with mental health and/or addictions challenges
- Veterans
- Women
- Youth
- Other

12. Please rate the following statements about the move to online service on a scale of *much easier* to *much harder* compared to in-person services.

- Allocating limited resources (e.g., physical, virtual, and emotional resources) ethically
- Building rapport and creating positive relationships with your clients
- Managing risk such as abuse/ aggression/escalation
- Promoting client self-efficacy with a collaborative, rather than authoritative, relationship
- Discussing and assessing pre-employability factors and client challenges (e.g., mental health)
- Reducing cultural challenges in communication or ideas
- Engaging with reluctant clients
- Identifying client strengths and weaknesses
- Communicating with employers about misconceptions, benefits, and solutions to perceived problems of hiring from underserved populations
- Aiding clients in job readiness (e.g., resume and cover letter writing, virtual or in person interviews, handshaking)
- Referring clients to other social or mental health services or help them access resources independently
- Discussing various issues (e.g., ethics) and debriefing with colleagues
- Establishing and sustaining professional relationships with members of the community and relevant associations (e.g., Indigenous groups, faith communities, businesses, governments)
- Facilitating group learning and training



- Communicating well and maintaining positive relationships with your colleagues

13. Please respond on a scale of *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* to following statements.

- The move to online/virtual services has opened the door for beneficial changes
- The move to online/virtual services has shifted my priorities at work
- My organization has a strategic short, mid and long-term plan for virtual or hybrid services

14. Please rate the following statements about the move to online service on a scale of *much easier* to *much harder* compared to in-person services.

- Addressing client's health (e.g., negative health behaviours such as smoking, or social anxiety)
- Accessing mental health supports for myself, and other career practitioners
- Measuring and developing client-specific outcomes
- Helping clients with accessibility (e.g., digital literacy, transportation)
- Customizing your approach to client learning and employment
- Understanding and staying up to date on labour market trends
- Accessing opportunities for personal career growth (e.g., certifications, courses)
- Protecting client privacy
- Learning new technologies
- Separating personal life from work
- Accessing and working with tools and resources (e.g., assessment tools and frameworks, information pamphlets, job leads)
- Keeping up with rule and policy changes
- Recruiting participants for programs, service, or training opportunities
- Managing your workload
- Contributing to career development-related research

15. What prevents you from developing the skills/competencies that you wish to build upon?
(Select all that apply)

- Employer training budget limitations
- Lack of personal funds
- Staff replacement/back-up issues
- Regulations/contracts limiting professional development expenditures
- Lack of interest/motivation/engagement



- Agency operations make formal training difficult
- Lack of relevant resources/training options (e.g., “availability of courses that meets needs”)
- Heavy workload
- No time
- Other

16. How do you usually develop your skills in your role? (Select all that apply)

- Job shadowing
- Mentoring
- In-house training
- Workplace-based courses/workshops
- Coaching
- Public workshops/seminars
- Conferences
- Facilitated online courses/training
- Self-paced distance learning
- Webinars
- I don't engage in personal development
- Other

17. Please rate your perception of the skill level of the average career development service provider in BC.

- Very unskilled
- Somewhat unskilled
- Somewhat skilled
- Very skilled

18. Please rate your perception of your own skill level as a career development service provider.

- Very unskilled
- Somewhat unskilled
- Somewhat skilled
- Very skilled

The following contains two separate questions using the same list of 26 competencies. Please read each question and answer accordingly.

19. Please take a moment to reflect on how important the competency is to perform your current role effectively virtually/online and select the **top 5-10** competencies that you



feel are the most important to your current role.

- Adhere to professional code of conduct.
- Guide practice using ethical decision-making process.
- Nurture a collaborative and trusting relationship.
- Promote a diverse and inclusive workforce and equitable access to resources and opportunities.
- Develop and sustain an evidence-based practice to improve outcomes.
- Commit to lifelong learning by developing new skills aligned with development in the field of practice and society.
- Promote well-being and a healthy work environment.
- Communicate in a clear and effective manner.
- Leverage current and emerging technologies to support career development practice.
- Develop foundational knowledge of field of practice.
- Engage clients in a structured career exploration.
- Provide individualized support to achieve learning and employment goals.
- Develop tailored approaches for client populations.
- Manage career resources to support client services and self-directed learning.
- Use tailored approaches to prepare client for learning and employment.
- Refer client to other professionals as required.
- Design and deliver sessions to address career-related learning and development needs.
- Conduct and lead research.
- Use assessment and evaluation methods.
- Facilitate transition from school to employment.
- Facilitate talent mobility.
- Work collaboratively with employers to address workforce challenges.
- Leverage capacity within the community.
- Engage in policy development and advocacy to further the interest of clients and the field of practice.
- Establish a culture of strategic thinking.
- Contribute to the advancement of the field.

20. Which of the following competencies would you most like training or skills-upgrading on?
(Select all that apply)

- Adhere to professional code of conduct.
- Guide practice using ethical decision-making process.
- Nurture a collaborative and trusting relationship.
- Promote a diverse and inclusive workforce and equitable access to resources and opportunities.



- Develop and sustain an evidence-based practice to improve outcomes.
- Commit to lifelong learning by developing new skills aligned with development in the field of practice and society.
- Promote well-being and a healthy work environment.
- Communicate in a clear and effective manner.
- Leverage current and emerging technologies to support career development practice.
- Develop foundational knowledge of field of practice.
- Engage clients in a structured career exploration.
- Provide individualized support to achieve learning and employment goals.
- Develop tailored approaches for client populations.
- Manage career resources to support client services and self-directed learning.
- Use tailored approaches to prepare client for learning and employment.
- Refer client to other professionals as required.
- Design and deliver sessions to address career-related learning and development needs.
- Conduct and lead research.
- Use assessment and evaluation methods.
- Facilitate transition from school to employment.
- Facilitate talent mobility.
- Work collaboratively with employers to address workforce challenges.
- Leverage capacity within the community.
- Engage in policy development and advocacy to further the interest of clients and the field of practice.
- Establish a culture of strategic thinking.
- Contribute to the advancement of the field.

21. If you have any other comments, concerns or questions regarding the transition to virtual/online work please share them here:

22. If you would like to be entered into a draw for the chance to win one of the prizes outlined in the consent form, please enter your name and email below.

23. We are looking for focus group members who are career development practitioners who have expertise in delivering services to underrepresented populations in the workforce. These focus group sessions will take place in July and August and participants are asked to commit 60-90 minutes of their time. Would you be willing to be contacted by one of our researchers to provide more information in a focus group?

Yes

No



24. In order to determine your area of expertise, please select the population that you work with the majority of the time (more than 50% of time/clients).

- Immigrants
- Indigenous peoples
- LGBTQ2IA+
- Newcomers
- Older workers
- Persons with disabilities
- People from rural, remote, and northern communities
- People with essential skills gaps
- People without post-secondary education
- Racialized individuals
- Refugees
- Those fleeing domestic violence
- Those with mental health and/or addiction challenges
- Veterans
- Women
- Youth
- I do not work with any of these populations more than 50% of the time

25. Please share your name and email, and one of our researchers will reach out. Thank you!



Appendix C Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

General Questions

Prompt

Tell us a little about your role as a Career Development Practitioner, what you do, who you work with etc.

Prompting Questions as needed:

- 1 In general, what challenges exist for career practitioners?
- 2 What are some elements that affect your ability to deliver career development?

Move to Online/New Challenges/Changes

Prompt

Now that you have moved services online/virtually what are some new challenges that you have faced?

Prompting Questions as needed:

- 3 How did the move online impact reaching underserved populations?
- 4 Looking ahead, what additional challenges do you anticipate?
- 5 Has this changed how you deliver culturally sensitive topics?
- 6 Has moving online changed how you deliver counselling skills, such as active listening or motivational interviewing?
 - a. How has interpersonal communication changed?
 - b. How has logistical communication changed?
- 7 What worries do CDP have about successfully completing their jobs moving forward in a pandemic/post-pandemic world?
- 8 Has this changed how practical skills are provided, such as mock interviews, or behaviours (like hand shaking training)
- 9 Has the inability to go physically with clients to places negatively impacted them, and if so, how?

How do you evaluate your programs/success/workplace

Prompt

With these changes, do you or your organization have a method of evaluating your program goals?

Prompting Questions as needed:

- 10 How do you currently evaluate the impact of your career counselling/career development programs or services?
- 11 As the effects of the pandemic change how you have delivered services, how do you continue to bring awareness to the services you offer and their helpfulness for potential clients?
- 12 Have you run any type of program evaluation since moving online?



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