

reThinking unEmployment: Client Profiles and Program Performance

T³ Associates
159 Gilmour Street
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0N8
613-236-4188



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Prepared by:
David Robinson, Ph.D., Alex P. Stringer, B.Sc. & Frank J. Porporino, Ph.D.

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CLIENT PROFILES AND PROGRAM PERFORMANCE

Introduction

reThinking unEmployment is an innovative approach that focuses on a targeted range of interpersonal and problem-solving skills critical to getting and keeping employment. The skills that are targeted have been identified generally in the Conference Board of Canada Employability Skills Profile. ***reThinking unEmployment*** combines cognitive skills training with a marketing skills development focus that helps participants access and achieve credibility in positioning their capabilities to prospective employers.

The cognitive skills training focus borrows from other developments within educational and psychological theory where there is mounting evidence to suggest that such techniques are powerful mechanisms for client change in a variety of behavioural domains. In the ***reThinking unEmployment*** program, these successful cognitive techniques are adapted specifically for the employment context with clients who have had a long history of difficulty securing and/or maintaining employment.

The set of skills that the program imparts are intended to help clients initiate and maintain the employment relationship in such a way that they are seen as a solution to the employers problems. Hence, the program attempts to promote the marketing skills that clients need to access appropriate job opportunities. The cognitive dimension gives them the “thinking” skills that they need to successfully negotiate pre-employment and employment situations – organizing your life so you can go to work, planning and establishing job search activities, getting along with employers and other workers, learning to problem-solve in the employment context, contributing to the success of the work organization, and maintaining the motivation necessary to want to work.

The skills training components are used in concert with a job development approach where the clients work extensively on building 3rd party support to increase their capability to access the labour market. As these clients have significant employment barriers (long term unemployment, limited education or work experience, disabilities, lack of confidence in personal abilities, negative attitudes/motivation towards working), their ability to enter the labor market will depend on limiting

the competition when they apply for jobs. This is done through being in the right place at the right time or having a 3rd party recommend you as the solution to an employment issue. Clients are assigned to job developers who will act professionally as a 3rd party assistant. Clients are also directed to build a personal network of non-professionals who will also assist in securing job opportunities. The job development phase is considered critical in assisting these difficult to place clients speed up and ensure re-entry into the job market.

The ***reThinking unEmployment*** program is intensive and comprehensive. It is designed to be delivered over a period of 8 weeks. Generally, participants attend the program on a daily basis and maintain session hours which are similar to a normal working day. The program is designed for individuals having a history of chronic unemployment problems. These clients are typified by long term unemployment, repeat loss of employment not related to the economy, negative motivation towards work, and lack of success with other intervention strategies.

The selection criteria for participation in the program are individuals:

- ❑ Who have exhausted most or all other programming alternatives available to them;
- ❑ Who display significant negative attitudes and motivation towards getting a job; and
- ❑ For whom counselors feel there has been little success with other interventions and little more that can be offered;

In essence, the program was developed to work with that pool of clients where chances of employment would be seen by referring agency evaluations as being next to zero.

All of these clients would have had access to a full range of employment programming including self directed supported job search, employment counselling and workshops, external referrals for specialized assistance, job development and subsidized training placements.

Program Pilot

The ***reThinking unEmployment*** program was formally piloted in 7 employment agencies within the province of Ontario. Program instructors received a two-week intensive training which exposed them to the conceptual underpinnings and the hands-on practical application of all of the techniques used in the program. As part of the pilot implementation, a multi-faceted research protocol was introduced to assess various aspects of program effectiveness. This included a set of questionnaires measures completed by the participants before commencement of the program, and then again shortly after completion. The research protocol also asked for client ratings completed by program instructors, and client feedback information to determine overall client satisfaction with the program.

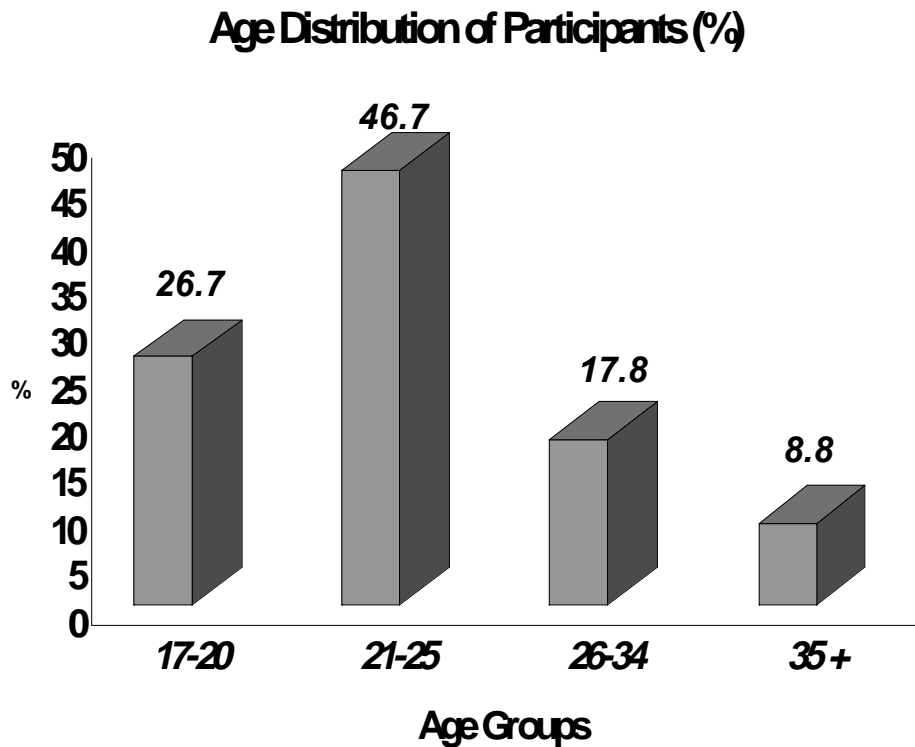
The program retention rates for this intensive program were much higher than expected, especially given the lack of motivation evidenced by clients at the onset. Most referring counsellors predicted that there was “no way” these clients would stick with a full-day, full-week program that lasted eight weeks. In fact, forty-six (46) individuals began ***reThinking unEmployment*** in the 7 pilot sites. Thirty-nine (39) participants completed the program. Overall, this represents a program completion rate of 85%. The completion rate is regarded as very high given the need profile of the clientele. It is also important to note that with the exception of one individual, the program dropouts occurred within the first 2 weeks of the program. Following the initial 2 week period, the instructors, as per the overall developmental design of the program, were successful in retaining almost all of their clients for the remaining 6 week duration. These figures speak to the program’s ability to quickly develop, and then sustain client motivation throughout an intensive program period.

Profile of Clients

Information was collected on the total of 46 clients who participated in the program. About three quarters of the sample were male and most of the participants were single (82%). The remainder were either married or in a common-law relationship (18%). The average age for this group was 24 years. As shown in Figure 1 most participants were drawn from the most difficult to serve group of youthful clients. In total 73.4% of the participants were 25 years or younger and more than one-quarter (26.7%) were 20 years old or less. Less than 10% of the participants were 35 years of age or older.

In terms of their employment profile, information about the participants confirmed their high need status in terms of long term reliance on social assistance, low educational achievement, and lack of employment experience.

Figure 1



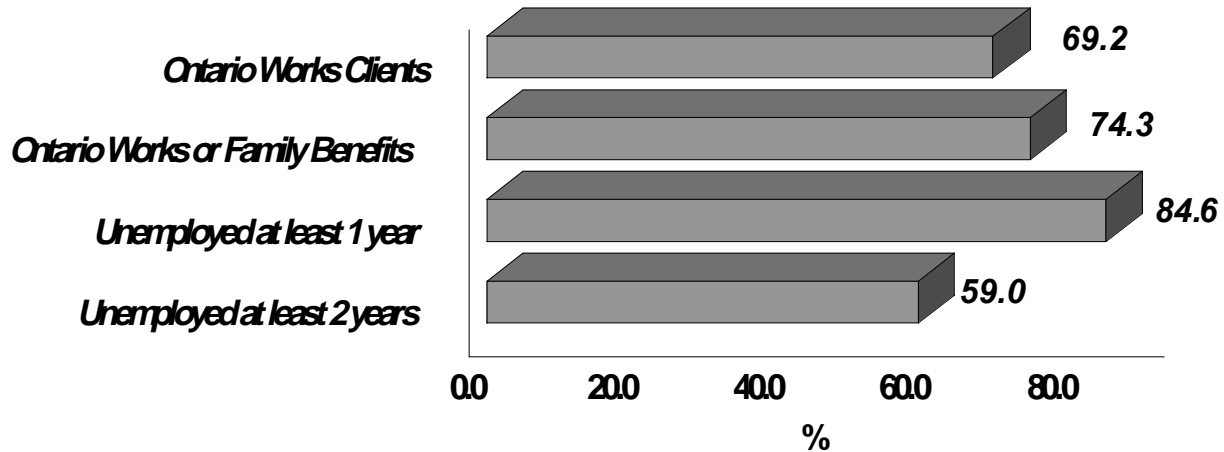
Information collected from pre-program interviews revealed the following:

- ❑ The majority of the participants were collecting social assistance at the time they began the program. For example, nearly three-quarters were on Ontario Works or Family Benefits (see Figure 2).
- ❑ Although roughly three quarters of the sample viewed their education level as being sufficient to obtain employment, only half of the sample had attained a high school diploma.

Regarding participation in job skills/readiness programs, almost three-quarters of the sample had previously enrolled in such programs.

Figure 2

Social Assistance and Employment Status



- ❑ An examination of the work experience of participants revealed significant problems. The majority had been unemployed (84.6%) for at least the last year and nearly two-thirds (59.0%) had been unemployed for at least two years (See Figure 2).
- ❑ Further, of those who held jobs, almost two thirds had worked more than one job, and almost half were not satisfied with their work nor their income. In many cases the jobs they held were offered “under the table” because they were not able to secure positions with more stable or legitimate employers.
- ❑ Only 28% of those who had held jobs in the last 2 years had been employed on a full-time basis.
- ❑ The clients focused mostly on issues related to themselves, particularly their lack of employment. The most common reasons they reported for unemployment were absence of work experience, a lack of job/employability skills, lack of education/vocational training, shortage

of potential employment contacts, and insufficient experience with the application and interview process.

Changes in Perception and Motivation

An examination of the questionnaire results revealed that the ***reThinking unEmployment*** participants made a number of important changes in areas that were targeted by the program. Clients initially presented as poorly motivated, low in self-efficacy, and lacking in interpersonal problem solving skills. However, by the end of the program their questionnaire responses indicated a number of positive changes in attitudinal measures.

“Self efficacy” was one area that was examined. This refers to how an individual assesses his/her personal resources to handle difficult life situations and the extent to which an individual believes he/she possesses the motivation, skills and abilities to achieve goals. Marked increases in employment “self-efficacy” were evident in the questionnaire responses. This is particularly important in view of the mostly “internal” attributions (i.e., blaming themselves) that clients used to explain their employment failure at the commencement of the ***reThinking unEmployment*** program.

- ❑ After completing the program, about three-quarters of participants expressed confidence in their ability to “deal with other people” on the job.
- ❑ About two-thirds of the participants expressed confidence in their ability to meet work goals after they had completed the program. A similar proportion felt that they could be dependable in being able to finish work that would be assigned to them.
- ❑ Following the program the participants were more optimistic about their job prospects with nearly 90% believing that they had the skills to find a job that was right for them.
- ❑ Participants also expressed more confidence in their ability to relate to employers. By the end of the program about two-thirds indicated that they would feel a high degree of comfort around their boss.

Teaching effective problem solving skills is a major focus area within the program. Clients learn to approach problems in a step-by-step fashion and begin to see the possibility of turning problems into “opportunities” –



collecting information for defining problems, accurately stating problems, examining alternative solutions, and selecting the best alternatives to meet their goals. Using a set of knowledge-based items aimed at assessing their grasp of problem-solving concepts, 73% of participants increased their scores on the test when they completed it at the end of the program.

The problem-solving data indicated that:

- ❑ Clients learned the importance of taking the time to think a problem through.
- ❑ There was a marked shift in understanding that people can learn to be good problem solvers rather than allowing problems to take over.
- ❑ Clients gained a better understanding of the need to accurately identify and define what their problems are before attempting to solve them.
- ❑ Clients demonstrated that they learned the distinction between being assertive and being aggressive when solving problems with other people.

While the program is not designed to target clients' feelings of personal well-being in any direct way, there was strong evidence that clients had a more positive mood and generally felt better about themselves. Obviously, such changes are a prerequisite for increasing the confidence and sense of "self-efficacy" that clients need to bring to the job search and employment situation. Sixty-eight percent of the **reThinking unEmployment** clients increased their reported feelings of well-being over the course of participating in the program. This included such indicators as:

- ❑ Increases in positive outlook and optimism about the future
- ❑ Decreases in loneliness and boredom
- ❑ Decreases in feelings of depression

It was important to assess clients' perceptions about the effectiveness of the program and the extent to which they found the material helpful. Using a *Client Feedback Questionnaire*, each client who completed the program had an opportunity to provide ratings on various aspects of the program as well as provide general comments about their experiences. Client feedback was highly positive.

- ❑ Almost all (97%) of the clients reported that they were either "satisfied" (>47%) or "very satisfied" (50%) with the program in an overall sense.

- ❑ The entire sample (100%) reported they felt that they had made significant steps toward achieving their employment-related goals.
- ❑ 97% stated that they felt this program would help them “keep a job in the future”, and over 91% stated that the program would help them in other areas of life as well.
- ❑ 97% of all clients involved in the program said that they would recommend this program to friends or relatives who are having employment problems.
- ❑ On satisfaction with instructors, the clients were also highly positive. Over 90% of the clients were positive in rating the skills and knowledge possessed by staff who delivered **reThinking unEmployment**.

It is important to demonstrate the clients found this new program appealing in a general way, especially given that most participants had been involved in a number of other employment programs in the past. Their general comments addressed a wide variety of issues. Many reported examples of how they had used the program to help solve problems in employment and a variety of other life contexts. Others referred in positive ways to the cohesiveness of their groups and the supportive environment the program seemed to engender. Some clients suggested that the program helped them improve their family life, control anger problems, help focus their daily schedule and habits to be more compatible with work, and even helped with more specific problems such as drug usage.

Instructor Ratings of Client Performance?

Instructors monitored the performance of participants at three stages during the program – at the beginning, mid-way, and after completion of all sessions. They used an *employability checklist* to rate how well the participants were performing on a number of behavioural dimensions which are considered critical for successful adjustment in today’s labour market. The ratings were based on how the clients participated individually, their contribution to teamwork, feedback from “job trial” employers, and observations from other staff in the agency who had an opportunity to observe the clients. The participants made consistent gains on the various employability dimensions from the beginning of the program to the end. Figures 3 present data showing the proportion of clients who made positive gains on the various ratings made by instructors. In most cases more than 80% of the clients showed

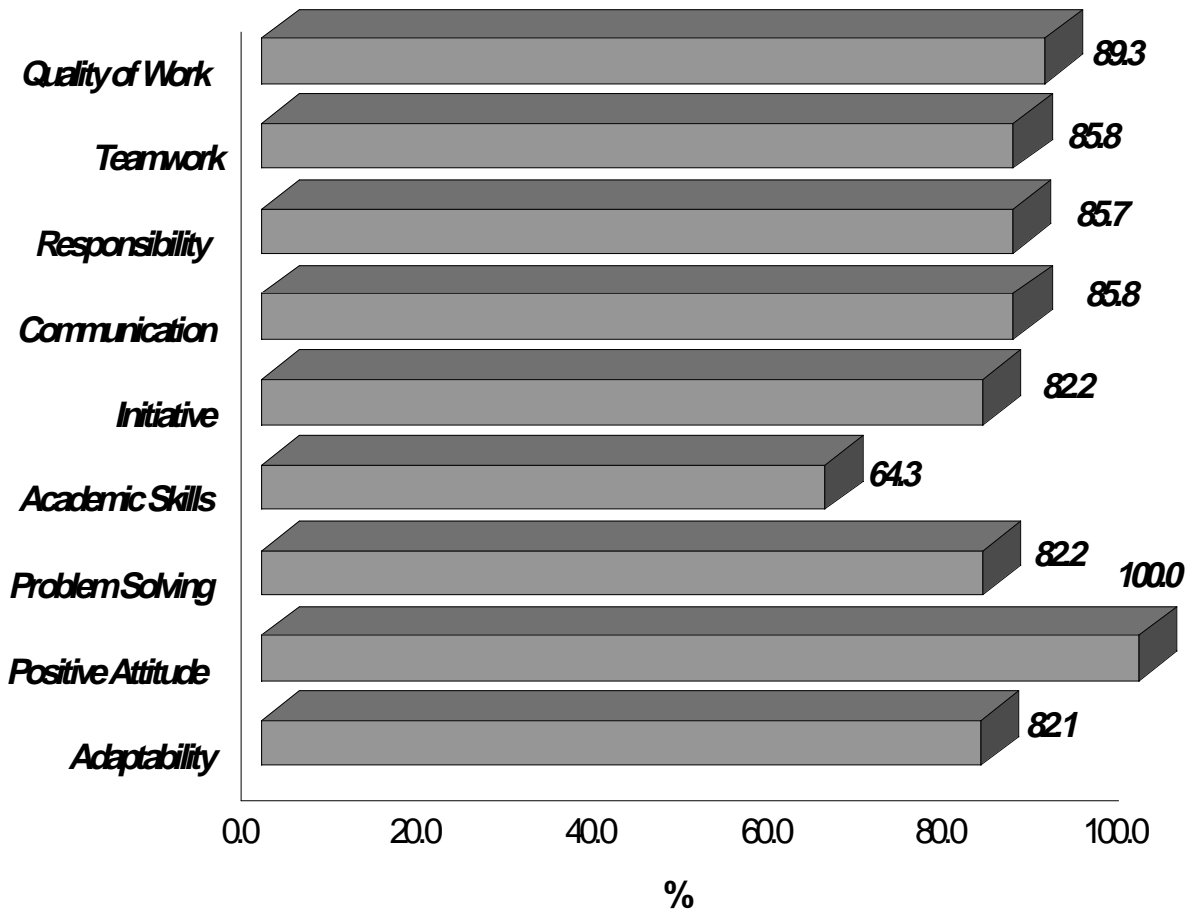


improvements on the employability measures. Included among the employability dimensions on which positive change was recorded were teamwork, responsibility, communication, initiative, problem-solving, positive attitude, adaptability, and work quality.

The positive assessments provided by the rating scales were supplemented by observations made by the instructors and other staff in their agencies. During the early phases of the pilot program many instructors were keenly aware that the program had effectively targeted a pool of participants who possessed high need for intervention and were at very high risk for negative employment

Figure 3

Improvement on Employability Checklist Dimensions



outcomes. Initially, they doubted that the program could maintain enough momentum to keep the clients returning to the sessions. However, the instructors were pleasantly surprised to observe that most clients quickly committed to the program requirements. Excellent attendance and punctuality for program sessions developed in many clients who had previously failed to keep appointments and who had never maintained a regular daily schedule or activities. Instructors who initially doubted that they could keep their clients involved in a program that was delivered over a two-month period, noted that some of the clients felt that the program was “not long enough”. Many of the instructors noticed a general maturation process occurring in their clients over the course of the 8-9 week program. They also commented on the relationships that developed within their groups and how clients learned to support each other in the learning process.

In addition to the instructors’ observations about their clients, other agency staff also noticed differences in the attitude and behaviour of the **reThinking unEmployment** clients. For example, many employment counselors who had made referrals to the program reported new levels of motivation in their clients. Clients who had made no progress on employment goals in the past were showing signs that they were serious about obtaining employment and taking the necessary steps to prepare themselves for doing so. Agency staff in most settings also observed changes in the interpersonal skill levels and pro-social behaviour of the clients. Many staff noted that clients were now demonstrating appropriate behaviour when asking for help or cooperating with activities being offered by the employment agency.

Client Behavioural Change – Employment Outcomes

Perhaps the most compelling evidence regarding program effectiveness for the **reThinking unEmployment** program is the actual employment outcomes experienced by clients. While long-term outcome data is not yet available, evidence regarding job placement rates and job trial outcomes can be used to assess the program’s ability to change client behaviour. The accompanying table shows these outcomes for the pilot sample of program completers.

As shown in Table 1, the employment outcomes for these high risk clients were highly favorable. “Job Trials” were used in 4 of the 7 **reThinking unEmployment** sites. Generally, job trials involved the use of employment assignments 1 day per week as part of the program. The job trials provided employers with an opportunity to assess the suitability of the job candidates while program participants were given an opportunity to practice the skills

they were acquiring in the program. While these clients would normally have some difficulty securing job trial placements because their job developers would have regarded them as too high risk, all who were eligible were successful in securing a job trial.

Another indicator of program success concerned the rate of completion of job trials. While not all job trials are completed by candidates under usual circumstances, all of the **reThinking unEmployment** clients (100%) who participated were successful in completing their job trials. The job trial is the first key indicator that the client will not live up to the expectations needed to be successful at work. The client who successfully completes a job trail is choosing to do so. This verifies their motivation and willingness to adapt to work environment conditions. Job trials test commitment and willingness to try. Given the chronic employment difficulties these clients experienced, the success of the job trials suggests that the program promoted important behavioural changes for the participants especially on motivation and belief that they could go to work and hold a job.

Successful employment placement at the end of the program is a major program objective for both program administrators and the program participants. After completing the program, 76% of the **reThinking unEmployment** participants had secured a position or enrolled in educational or

Table 1

<i>Employment Outcomes</i>	n	%
<i>Job Trials</i>		
Eligible for Job Trial	22	
Secured Job Trial	22	100%
Completed Job Trial	22	100%
<i>Post Program Employment Outcomes</i>		
Eligible for Job Placement*	38	
Secured Job Placement	29	76%
Secured Job Placement (Adjusted)**	32	91%



*Excludes 1 of the 39 program completers who was ill, and therefore not eligible for placement.

**Excludes 6 participants who did not receive the job development component of the program.

vocational programs. One of the programs within the pilot did not offer the job development component of the program (participants n=6). Hence, these clients were not exposed to the full range of services included in **reThinking unEmployment**. When these participants are excluded from calculations, the job placement rate increases to 91%. While the overall job placement rate of 76% for program completers is impressive for this group of clients, the adjusted rate of 91% highlights the importance of the job development component of program implementation.

Conclusion

Although this evaluation focused on an initial pilot implementation of the **reThinking unEmployment** program, consistent positive results were documented. Clients who participated in the program were at considerable high risk for continued unemployment. With eight weeks of intensive intervention this picture changed.

Clients were very satisfied with the program and with their instructors. Despite very limited employment experience, they became more optimistic about future employment and more confident in their ability to handle people and situations in the work setting. The mood and affect of clients improved significantly and a majority learned usable and relevant problem-solving skills. Instructors recognized these improvements and rated the clients accordingly as having made progress in their ability to communicate, take responsibility and initiative, be adaptive, work as part of a team and sustain a positive attitude.

Finally, all of these changes actually translated into behaviour change. It was documented that clients were successful in their job trials and that a majority secured a job placement on completion of the program. Taken together, these data speak clearly to the effectiveness of this innovative approach to guide and coach individuals back to the job market.