

Working Positive

A Needs Assessment of Employment Action For People Living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs)

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April 2003



The opinions expressed in this report are those of the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) and the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (TPWAF) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR).

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a grant from the Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR).

The project benefited from the assistance of ACT's Employment Consultants (Cathy Dickson, Don Phaneuf, John Wilson and Nick Rodrigue). Special thanks also to Sergio Martinez and the volunteers who assisted with mailing the survey to over 300 individuals who had ever participated in the Employment Action program.

Dionne Falconer facilitated the focus groups, and Merita Simitciu was the research assistant for most of the project. Allison Hughes and Marisa Ribeiro transcribed the focus group and personal interviews with current and former Employment Action clients.

The Advisory Committee, comprising Darrell Kloeze, John Lavis, Kirk Cooper, Ryan Bureyko, two Employment Action clients and one potential client, graciously shared their expertise and insights throughout the project.

Finally, the project could not have been completed without the willing and enthusiastic participation of many current and former Employment Action clients. These individuals participated in the survey, focus groups, or personal interviews and shared their experiences and expectations of Employment Action.

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Executive Summary

Employment Action (EA) is a program to prepare people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) to re-enter the workforce. The program started in 1999 as a partnership between the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) and the Toronto People with AIDS Foundation (TPWAF).

This needs assessment of EA was a yearlong project that commenced in March 2002. The project was designed to understand (a) how clients benefit (or not) from EA, (b) clients' needs and expectations of EA and their motivations to enter the workforce, and (c) challenges that clients experience with regard to re-entering the workforce, and the extent to which EA was assisting clients to meet them.

Clients participated in a survey designed to profile their demographic status and their expectations and experiences of EA. In subsequent focus group interviews, clients discussed at some length issues related to returning to work and the extent to which EA addressed these issues. Clients were also interviewed in person to examine issues that may not have been appropriate for a focus group format.

EA attracts many more men than women. The survey indicates that clients are mainly in their 30s and 40s, and have achieved fairly high levels of formal education. Their main sources of financial support are various benefit programs, especially the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). They expected and received a range of services from EA, though most knew virtually nothing about the program at the time they joined.

Participants acknowledged a number of needs and expectations that were being met by EA. These include advice and counselling about return-to-work issues related to their income benefit program, advice and tools to prepare them to re-enter the workforce (e.g., resumés, etc.), and advice and counselling about managing HIV in the workplace. Participants also noted that their self-confidence improved while participating in the program, and that EA offered a supportive environment.

However, participants also articulated a number of challenges and unmet needs. Principally, they noted that their preparation to re-enter the workforce did not culminate in jobs or job offers. Among other issues, participants also expressed concern about inadequate follow-up by the EA consultants, and perceived a lack of focus in the program. They expressed a great deal of frustration with their benefit programs related to their decision to return to work, even while acknowledging the valuable advice and counselling from the EA consultants regarding these programs.

It is important to recognize that no single program could ever meet all the needs of PHAs who want to return to work. The unmet needs and challenges should not be interpreted as individual entries on a "to do" list. Instead, the partnering organizations must re-examine the mandate and purpose of EA, determine again what services fulfill the program's mandate and purpose, and find ways to market and promote the program accordingly. To do otherwise might threaten the program's relevance and sustainability.

Introduction

Employment Action (EA) is a program to provide advice and tools to people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) who want to (re)enter the workforce. The program commenced in 1999 as a joint initiative of the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) and the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (TPWAF).

This report is the result of a needs assessment of Employment Action, a one-year project that started in March 2002. Current and former EA clients participated in a survey, focus groups and personal interviews that were designed to improve understanding of their program needs, expectations and experiences.

The report begins with an outline of EA. This is followed by a discussion of the objectives of the needs analysis and the data gathering methods. The report then proceeds with a discussion of the profile of EA clients, their expectations and their experiences of the program. Most of the remainder of the report builds on the focus groups and personal interviews to understand how EA met or did not meet clients' needs and expectations, the challenges that clients faced while participating in the program, who benefits (or not) from EA, and clients' suggestions for improving the program to better meet their needs. Finally, the report summarises the main issues and outlines a basic approach to improving the program in the future.

EA meets some needs and not others but, on the whole, clients are impressed with the program. The most obvious gap between needs/expectations and outcome is on the issue of jobs for clients. Clients need and expect to find jobs, though most will exit the program without becoming employed. This lapse in the program is due to confusion within EA and among clients about the program's purpose and goals.

Outline of Employment Action (EA)

Brief history

Employment Action (EA) provides people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) with the information, tools, and support they need to (re)enter the workforce. The service is free and confidential. EA's employment consultants offer guidance and counselling to help PHAs set employment goals and work to achieve them.

EA started in 1999 as a joint program of the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) and the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (TPWAF). ACT provides employment services to EA clients, while TPWAF provides counselling and advice on clients' disability and other benefits programs.¹ In addition, the HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario (HALCO) provides legal assistance to PHAs who are seeking legal advice about benefits and other matters.

The decision to implement EA was based on a report, entitled *Back to the Future: A Feasibility Study on Return-to-Work Programming for People Living with HIV/AIDS*,² commissioned by ACT in 1997. ACT presented the report at a national conference of the Canadian AIDS Society in January 1998 and at an open forum at the 519 Church Street Community Centre in Toronto in March 1998. The study found that there was a real need for programs to help PHAs re-enter the workforce and more generally to assist PHAs in their career development. The return of PHAs to the workforce signals that HIV/AIDS is becoming a chronic but manageable condition, and acknowledges that pursuing work and a career are ways in which PHAs can feel integrated into society. However, PHAs experience numerous barriers to effective reintegration into the workforce.³

Structure of EA

The services offered by EA are organized as shown in Figure 1, though each participant progresses through the program according to his or her needs (as determined by the participant and her/his EA consultant as part of the intake process and updated subsequently). Each client commences his or her participation in EA by completing a workbook (entitled "Exploring Your Options"). The completed workbook is actually an exhaustive client profile covering the client's personal attributes and life history. This information is useful to the EA consultants, but the process of completing the workbook also provides clients an opportunity to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, aptitudes, skills and experiences related to functioning in the workforce.

¹ See p. 49 for a Glossary of Government Benefit Programs.

² Grubb, I. and C. McClure (1997). *Back to the Future: A Feasibility Study On Return-to-Work Programming for People Living With HIV/AIDS*. Toronto: Health Hounds.

³ See: *A Comprehensive Guide for the Care of Persons with HIV Disease: Rehabilitation Services Module 7* (1998). Toronto: Wellesley Central Hospital; Brooks, R. (1997). *Assisting Persons Living With HIV/AIDS to Return to Work*. AIDS Project Los Angeles; Canadian AIDS Society (1996). *Poverty, Discrimination and HIV/AIDS: A Brief to the Parliamentary Sub-Committee on HIV/AIDS by the Canadian AIDS Society*; Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (2000). *Policy Issues on Rehabilitation in the Context of HIV Disease: A Background Paper*. Toronto; Grubb and McClure (1997).

Figure 1. Overview of the Employment Action Program

COMPONENT	CONTENT
Intake	Review program details
	Client completes her/his EA workbook
	Determine client commitment to the program
	Determine client needs and next steps
Benefits counselling	ODSP, etc. (TPWAF)
	Long Term Disability (LTD) clinic
Career decision making	Identify barriers, job goal, action plan
	Vocational assessment
	Academic and/or language skills upgrading
	Job trials
	Finalize job goals
	Determine skill requirements and labour market information
	Determine transferable skills and new skills required
	Research training and funding options
	Training/upgrading courses
	Supports coordination ¹
Career action plan	Resumés and cover letters
	References, disclosure and benefits management
	Interviewing skills
Placement plan	Develop job search action plan
	Negotiate unpaid work trials
	Job accommodations ²
	Hiring incentives ³
	On-the-job training
	Active job search
	Employer/client screening for job match ⁴
	Placement
Follow-up supports	Job maintenance coordination ⁵
	Regular follow-up: job satisfaction and progress

¹consultant's time and effort supporting clients through their action plan;

²EA consultant works with the employer to ensure that appropriate workplace accommodations are available to the client (e.g., having access to a fridge to store medications);

³wage subsidies available to an employer from a client's disability benefits program to offset the employer's cost of training a client;

⁴matching employer needs with client's strengths and assets;

⁵follow-up with employer and client for up to 6 months of a client's placement.

Clients who are job ready (i.e., need help getting a placement) may spend 3-6 months before they get hired. Clients who progress through all the steps more or less sequentially (except for academic or ESL upgrading which may taken up to 18 months) may take about 6-18 months to become job ready. At any one time, about 30% of clients are job ready and the remaining 70% are going through the pre-employment steps.

The numbers of new EA clients each year from 1999 to 2002, and their distribution according to income source, are shown in Table 1. Except for the “Other” category, ODSP accounts for the largest number of new clients each year, though the proportion had fallen from almost half (45.5%) in 1999 to less than one-third (30.5%) in 2002. On the whole, the number of new clients has decreased by a quarter (25.5%) during 2000-2002 (i.e., if the 15 unprocessed clients are included in the 2002 total). However, this trend does not necessarily indicate that the EA program is diminishing. The number of new clients each year adds to the number of clients already in the program from the previous or earlier years. Thus, the cumulative effect of new clients would be an increase from one year to the next in the number of clients enrolled in the program.

Table 1. New clients enrolled in Employment Action by source of income 1999-2002

YEAR	EI	OW	LTD	LTD and CPP	ODSP	ODSP and CPP	CPP	Other	TOTAL
*1999	6	2	15	6	55	11	3	23	121
*2000	9	17	12	12	36	29	7	39	161
2001	12	19	3	10	37	11	2	40	134
**2002	11	19	2	7	32	7	2	25	105
TOTAL	38	57	32	35	160	58	14	127	521

*In 1999 and 2000, approximately 5% of clients did not progress beyond the intake interview.

**The total for 2002 does not include an additional 15 individuals whose application had not been processed by the end of the year.

EI: Employment Insurance

LTD: Long Term Disability

ODSP: Ontario Disability Support Program

OW: Ontario Works

CPP: Canada Pension Plan

Objectives and Methods

Goals and objectives

The goal of this project is to document and better understand how participants experience the EA program and the extent to which the program meets participants’ needs.

The objectives are as follows:

1. To understand who benefits or does not benefit from EA;

2. To better understand clients' needs and expectations, and how EA meets and addresses those needs and expectations;
3. To document the experiences, views, and perspectives of clients regarding their motivations and efforts to (re)enter the workforce and how these impact EA services; and
4. To develop a better understanding of the individual, organizational, and institutional/structural challenges, difficulties and barriers that clients have experienced with regard to (re)entering the workforce.

Ultimately, the needs assessment will provide ACT and TPWAF with data and insights to facilitate a redesign and renewal of the program to meet clients' needs.

Methods

The project commenced in March 2002, but data collection took place between May 2002 and January 2003. Three data collection methods were used.

Client survey. The survey consisted of a questionnaire mailed to 116 current EA clients (Active participants) and a separate questionnaire mailed to 195 Inactive participants¹ in May 2002 (Appendix 1), after excluding a minority of clients whose contact information was incomplete.² The survey was anonymous (i.e., questionnaires were not coded to track or identify individual respondents) for two reasons. First, an anonymous survey gives respondents the opportunity to indicate or comment on their status and experiences as honestly as possible, or to refuse to respond, without the fear of sanction. Second, the project partners did not want to take any action that might appear to breach clients' confidentiality. In regard to the latter reason, the survey materials referred to EA but not to the project partners, nor to HIV/AIDS (e.g., the return address was an EA PO Box). One possible drawback of the survey design is that there is no information available about clients who did not respond to the survey. However, the information in the client database is insufficient to permit an informed comparison between respondents and non-respondents anyway. It is also possible that the survey may have appealed more to clients who are comfortable with written English. However, based on what is already known about the EA caseload, this does not appear to be a cause for concern.

The questionnaire and information letter were followed two weeks later by letters reminding and encouraging current and former clients to respond to the survey. This second mailing also included a form for clients to indicate if they were *not* interested in being contacted to participate in a focus group and/or personal interview. Clients who were not interested in participating in a focus group or personal interview would have signed the form and returned it to ACT separately.

¹ "Inactive" refers to individuals who are no longer actively involved in EA (i.e., those who dropped out, those who completed the program, and others no longer actively involved but who may seek advice or check in with the consultants from time to time).

² The initial and follow-up mailing both included stamped, addressed return envelopes.

The survey was essential because the EA client database contained little information pertinent to understanding the profile of EA clients and their experiences of the program. Consequently, the purpose of the survey was to understand the basic socio-demographic profile of all clients who had ever participated in EA, and to catalogue their expectations and experiences of the program.

After discounting for questionnaires that were returned to ACT undelivered, we estimate the maximum number of responses at 108 Active clients and 148 Inactive clients. Completed questionnaires were received from 52 Active clients and 21 Inactive clients which, based on the de facto targets identified above, give response rates of 48% and 14% for Active and Inactive clients respectively. Survey results from the Active clients are discussed in some detail below. However, we will not discuss the survey of the Inactive clients, given the small number of Inactive responses.

Focus groups. Two focus groups each for Active and Inactive EA clients were held in late October 2002, followed by two focus groups for Inactive participants held in November (see Appendix 2). Table 2 shows a basic profile of the focus groups.

Table 2. Focus groups profile

	Date	Confirmed	Attended	Women	Men	Age 30-39	Age 40-49
Active 1	Oct. 23	8	7	2	5	4	3
Active 2	Oct. 29	9	9	1	8	4	5
Inactive 1	Nov. 5	7	3	0	3	2	1
Inactive 2	Nov. 27	6	6	0	6	2	4

The main purposes of the focus group interviews were:

- (a) to explore in greater detail and richness some of the issues first raised in the mail survey, namely clients' expectations and experiences of EA; and
- (b) to understand clients' experiences and needs related to (i) the decision to return to work and the challenges posed by their income benefits programs, (ii) finding a job, or not, and (iii) EA as a whole.

The focus groups were designed by ACT but were facilitated by Dionne A. Falconer (DA Falconer & Associates) with assistance from Merita Simitciu (ACT research assistant). Potential focus group participants were identified from a list of all Active and Inactive clients, and were contacted by telephone or email. The EA database was divided into Active and Inactive clients, and each division was stratified according to the highest level of activities that clients had completed (e.g., job ready, placed, etc). Names were selected at random from each category. The actual focus groups participants were those that consented to participate from the initial list identified from the EA database. The discussion of the focus group results is based on a report prepared by the facilitator, and summary reports on each focus group prepared by the research assistant.

Semi-structured interviews. Individual face-to-face interviews were held with seven Active clients and the same number of Inactive clients (Appendices 3a and 3b). The purpose of the interviews was to understand clients' needs and expectations on a personal level. The personal interviews were also intended as a "safe space" where participants could be free to discuss personal and confidential issues (e.g., health, financial situation, specific experiences, etc.) that are not appropriate for a focus group format. Participants were selected from the database of Active and Inactive clients to reflect different sequences of involvement in the program.

Profile of Active Clients and Their Experiences

Demographic Profiles of Active participants

Of the 32 survey respondents who gave the year and month when they joined EA, 23 (72%) had been participating for three months or longer.

Respondents are mainly reasonably well educated men in their 30s and 40s (Fig. 2) whose current source of income is provincial and/or federal disability support programs. Relatively few women participate in EA (at the time of the survey a quarter of all active clients were women). Only four women responded to the survey, representing 7.7% of respondents. In terms of formal schooling, more than half of respondents were university or college graduates, and an additional 29% had "some university or college" (Fig. 3).

As expected, a substantial number of respondents (24 persons, or 46.2%) indicated that their principal source of income was a provincial or federal government disability program (ODSP and/or CPP) (Fig. 4). Only 14 respondents (27%) cited employment as their main income source at the time of the survey. Encouragingly, there appears to be a trend that after respondents become involved in EA there is an increased chance that they will start receiving income from employment (e.g., only 7 persons or 13.5% of respondents were supported principally by employment income when they joined EA). Given that the majority of respondents rely on income benefit program, incomes are generally low (Fig. 5) - only 8 respondents (15.4%) earned more than \$1,500 monthly.

Slightly more than a third of respondents (19 persons, or 36.5%) are recent immigrants (i.e., they have lived in Canada for an average of six years). They tend to be fairly well educated – 58% were university or college graduates, compared to 47% of respondents born or raised in Canada. This client profile is somewhat consistent with some aspects of Toronto's population as a whole – a large immigrant population, and a substantial number of highly educated recent immigrants who are unable to participate in the labour force to the extent that their qualifications suggest.¹

¹ Galabuzi, G-E. (2001). *Canada's Creeping Economic Apartheid: The Economic Segregation and Social Marginalization of Racialized Groups*. Toronto: CSJ Foundation for Research and Education; Reitz, J. (1998). *Warmth of the Welcome: The Social Causes of Economic Success for Immigrants in Different Nations and Cities*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Figure 2. Age Distribution of Active Clients

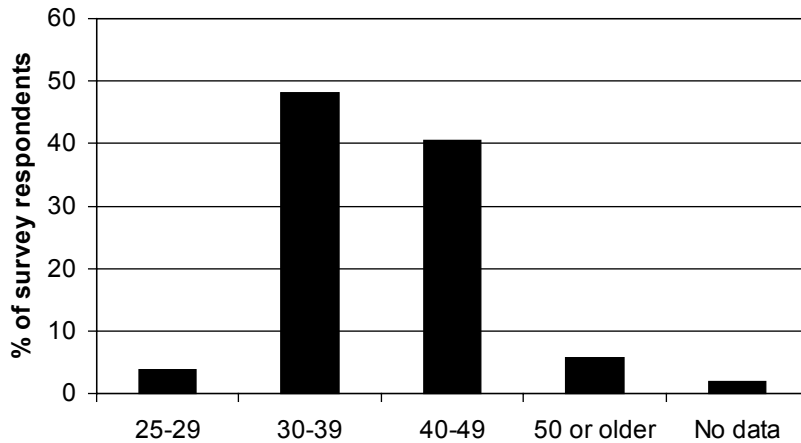
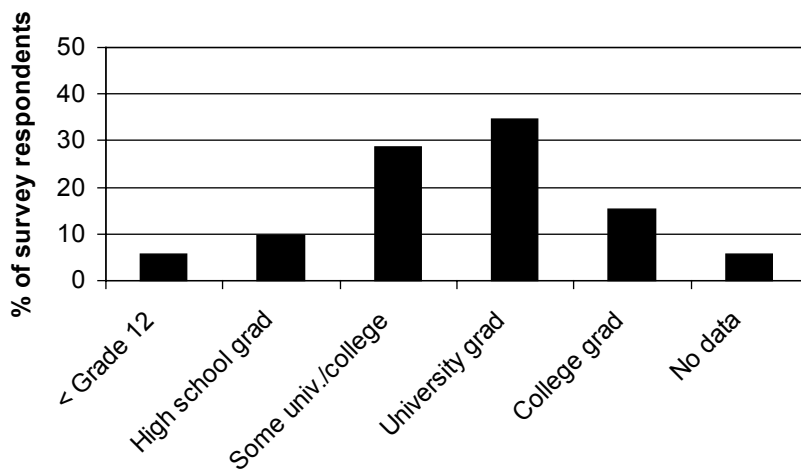


Figure 3. Level of Schooling - Active Clients



Participants' knowledge and expectations of EA

Respondents knew very little about EA prior to joining. On a 4-point scale from “a lot” (1) to “nothing or almost nothing” (4), a clear majority of respondents (30 persons, or 58%) indicated that they knew “nothing or almost nothing” about EA before joining, and a further 31% knew only “a little”. The lack of knowledge about EA is borne out by responses to the question of how respondents learned about the program (Fig. 6). The primary sources of information about EA should be word of mouth (friends, relatives, etc.), advertisements in community newspapers, referrals, and brochures. However, with the possible exception of newspaper advertisements and brochures, only small proportions of respondents cited these other sources.

Figure 4. Main Income Sources - Active Clients

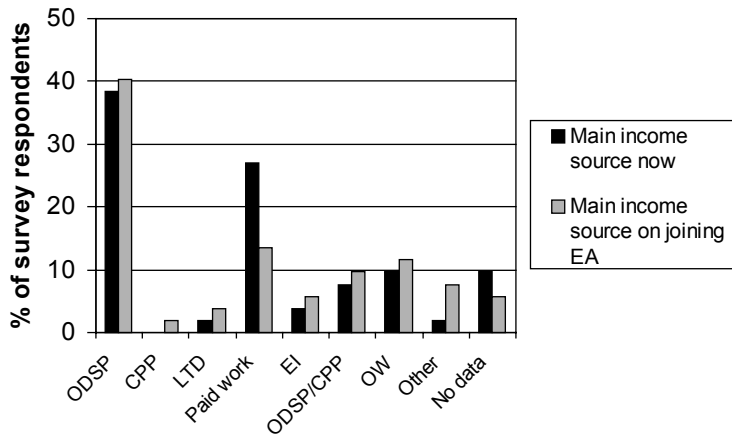
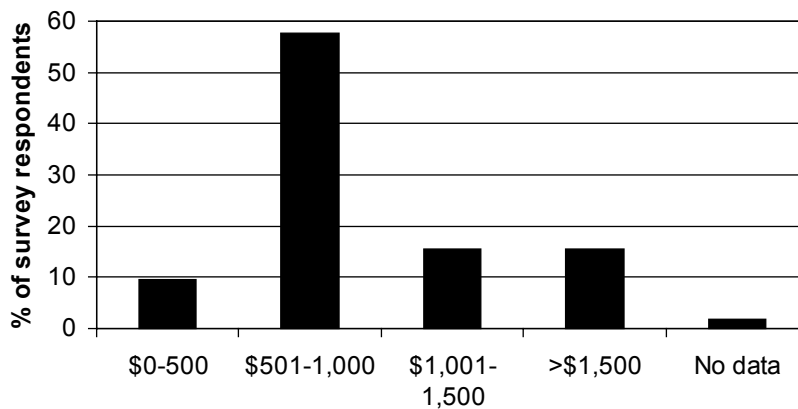


Figure 5. Personal Monthly Income - Active Clients



Regarding the reasons why participants joined EA, there was a strong emphasis on very direct and practical reasons such as getting a job and upgrading their skills (Fig. 7). Apart from these two reasons, large numbers of respondents also wanted to get help with looking for jobs, preparing their resumés, and getting help with choosing the types of jobs that they should look for. Conversely, respondents indicated scant interest in improving interview skills and opportunities for on-the-job experience.

Joining up: employment status and employment expectations

As should be expected, a minority of respondents were employed at the time they joined EA (9 respondents, or 17%). Thirty-nine respondents indicated that they were not working at the time they joined EA, but 11 of these (28%) were immigrants who had never worked in Canada. The survey results suggest that EA participants may be out of work for relatively short periods of time before joining the program. Of the 28 Canadian

born or raised who were not working when they joined EA, 12 (42.9%) had been out of work for a year or less, and only 8 (28.6%) had been out of work for five years or longer.

Figure 6. How Clients first learned about EA

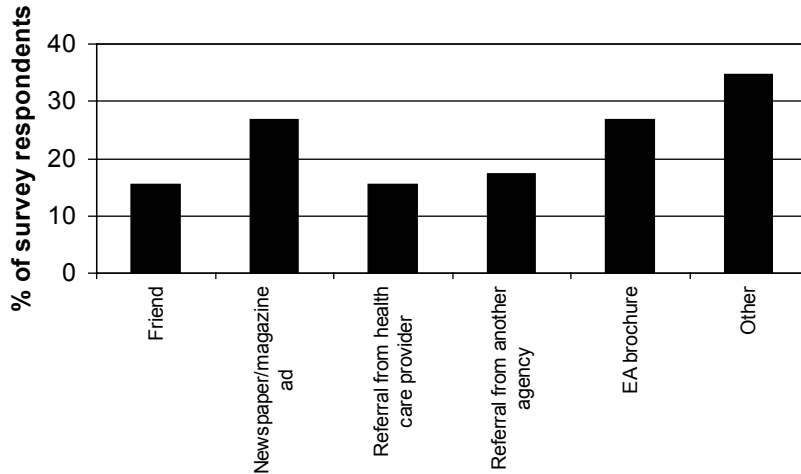
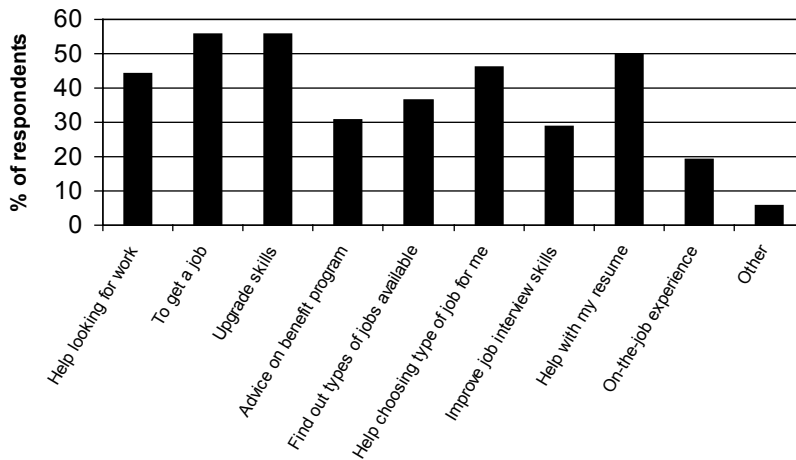


Figure 7. Reasons for Joining EA



Respondents who were not working at the time they joined EA cited a number of reasons for being out of work. However, the most prevalent reasons were “risk of losing benefits” (18 respondents, or 46%) and “health problems” (17 respondents, or 44%).

When respondents enter the EA program, they appear to have formed specific employment goals. Thirty-seven respondents (71%) indicated that they already knew the type of work they wanted to do (though 8 respondents changed their preference after discussing employment goals with their EA consultant), and 33 respondents (63.5%) wanted to work full time.

Experiences

Paid employment. One of the services that EA provides is to assist clients in finding employment opportunities while they are still actively participating in the program. In addition to generating income for participants, these opportunities are a mechanism for clients and their consultant to practically assess clients' job readiness. Some participants also find jobs on their own efforts (i.e., independent of EA), which may not be consistent with their employment goals but provide them with an income nevertheless.

Slightly more than a third of survey respondents (i.e., 19 persons) ever worked for pay while taking part in EA, though only a minority of these (7 persons) were assisted by their EA consultant in finding their job. Those who worked at some point during their EA program were perhaps fairly well prepared to work anyway – 11 of the 19 were college or university graduates, and a further 7 had “some university or college”. The majority of respondents (33, or 63.5%) had not worked since they started participating in EA. Among those who did not work, over 45.5% (15 respondents) felt paid employment might have jeopardized their disability or other benefits, and over a third (12 respondents) thought that they were not yet ready to work.

About a third of respondents (19, or 36.5%) were working for pay at the time of the survey, though four of these claimed that they did not work while participating in EA. This apparent anomaly suggests that these four no longer consider themselves to be actively participating in EA, probably because they have achieved their employment goal and they interact with EA consultants infrequently. Their current jobs were “accounting”, event planning, teaching and “sales”.

Most of those who were working at the time of the survey (14 of 19) cited “work” as their main source of income. This suggests that they were eligible only for whatever employment benefits came with their jobs (i.e., unlike five of the original 19 who were still receiving income from ODSP and Ontario Works). However, in this group of 14 employed at the time of the survey and whose job was their main income source, seven were not receiving any health, insurance or disability benefits, and only six had an employer supported drug plan. Of the total 19 respondents who were working at the time of the survey, 10 had no benefit plan.

Training and skills upgrading. EA clients and their consultant determine what training or upgrading courses would assist participants in meeting their employment goals. This is especially important for participants who have been out of the workforce for an extended period and/or who want to pursue a different area of work from what they did previously. Slightly less than half of Active participants (24 persons, or 46%) took a training or upgrading course. Participants are not restricted to a single course; they may take a number of related courses to fill various gaps in their skill set. Among the 24 respondents who took training or upgrading courses, 14 took two courses and 8 took a third course. Most of the training/upgrading was computer-related. Seventeen respondents (71%) took at least one computer-related course, mainly about specific computer applications (e.g., Excel, MYOB, etc.).

Respondents generally agreed that the courses were worth the effort: 83% (16 of 24) indicated that their training or upgrading program was very or somewhat helpful. Among the 28 respondents who did not take training or upgrading courses, the main reason was that they could not afford any courses (12 respondents, or 43%).¹ Interestingly, no respondents attributed their non-participation in training/upgrading to unavailability of opportunities.

Unpaid work placements. Only 8 respondents (15% of all respondents) indicated that they did an unpaid work placement as part of their EA program. These placements were of brief duration, from 4 to 12 weeks. When asked to indicate their reasons for not having taken an unpaid work placement, one quarter (10 of 39) indicated that they wanted to work for pay. The low participation rate in unpaid work placements is not necessarily due to an absence of opportunity – only 2 of 39 respondents indicated that no placements were available in their field.

Getting what they expect from EA?

Respondents indicated that they received an extensive array of help, advice and counselling from EA (Table 3). Respondents mostly were assisted with specific tools related to getting jobs, followed by advice about return-to-work issues related to their benefit programs.

Table 3. Help or advice clients received from Employment Action

Help or advice received	% of survey respondents
Help with my resumé	55.8
Advice on training or upgrading my skills	50.0
Help with writing job applications	44.2
Advice on benefits programs	42.3
Help with how to look for a job	38.5
Help finding where to get training/upgrading	32.7
Advice about workplace disclosure of my health status	32.7
Help choosing type of jobs I should try to get	30.8
Advice on different types of jobs available	28.8
Help with doing job interviews	28.8
Help/advice on how to apply for a job	26.9
On-the-job experience	15.4
Advice on how to get references	9.6
Advice on how to conduct myself at work	7.7
Advice on improving my language skills	1.9
Other help or advice	11.5

¹ This response most likely indicates that they could not access funding from government employment supports programs to pay for the courses.

In Figure 7, the two primary reasons respondents gave for joining EA were “to get a job” and “to get advice on upgrading my skills” (56% cited these two reasons). On the surface, respondents would have been disappointed on the first reason (getting a job). Of the 29 respondents who joined EA to get a job:

- 16 (55%) had not found work by the time of the survey;
- of the 13 respondents who worked, just 6 claimed that EA helped them to get a job.

That is, 29 participants joined EA to get a job, but EA was successful in helping just 6 (21%) to achieve this by the time of the survey. Though it may be argued that the remainder were not yet acceptably job-ready, the results of the focus group interviews (discussed below) indicate that the relative lack of jobs is a real issue for clients.

However, it may be true that joining EA to get a job is a laudable but unrealistic expectation for people who have been out of the workforce for several months and whose medical condition might limit their ability to work full time. Before joining, many (perhaps most) participants might have interpreted EA as a placement service. If this is the case, then the EA team has to do a much better job of publicizing and marketing the program. Indeed, the survey indicates that publicity and marketing may be a problem. Among the 29 respondents who joined EA “to get a job” (i.e., might have misinterpreted EA as a placement service), the largest numbers became aware of EA from sources that would normally be considered authoritative – EA brochures (10 respondents) and newspaper advertisements (9 respondents).

Considering the nature of EA, perhaps a more appropriate expectation among participants would be to get help or counselling with looking for work (rather than “to get a job”). To some extent, this appears to be the case. Among the 23 respondents who joined EA to get help looking for a job, EA appears to have met this expectation or need - a majority (16, or 70%) indicated that “EA advised me on how to apply for a job”. However, for related aspects of looking for work (such as how to apply for a job, choosing the type of jobs to pursue, help with doing job interviews, and help with preparing resumés), participants were not as successful.

Respondents who joined EA to get advice on benefits appear to have been successful in this respect (16 were expecting this, and 13 of them received). Similarly, a majority of respondents who wanted help with choosing the type of jobs that they should try to get indicated they received this (13 of 24), and those who wanted help with improving their job interview skills appear to have received the type of help they were expecting (10 of the 15 expecting this).

On the whole, respondents appear to be enthusiastic about EA: close to three-quarters would recommend EA to someone (presumably a PHA) who needed assistance with (re)entering the workforce. Less than 10% of respondents (4 persons) said they would not recommend EA to someone else. Open-ended comments solicited on the questionnaire also demonstrate that clients are favourably disposed to EA. Of the 29

respondents wrote comments about EA, only two clients commented unfavourably. More typically, respondents expressed support or appreciation for the program, such as:

“Excellent program with informative, supportive counsellors.”

“Well organized.”

“Very knowledgeable staff.”

Otherwise respondents offered suggestions on how to improve the program, such as:

“Involve more evening classes for computer skills”.

“Target more HIV-friendly employers.”

Understanding Needs and Expectations – Focus Groups with Active Clients

Expectations of EA

Participants spoke about a range of expectations associated with joining EA, though the expectation of finding a job was prevalent. As mentioned in the discussion of survey results, participants joined EA with the perception that EA was a placement service or job bank. In the words of one participant:

“I was hoping it was some kind of job bank for people who were seeking employers that were sensitive to our issues ... I guess my sense is that there aren't like a lot of job opportunities that are flowing through Employment Action”

Perhaps more reasonably, some participants expected assistance and support in preparing them to find jobs. This preparation involves much of the range of services offered by EA, such as setting or defining employment goals, training or upgrading, preparing resumés, and job search strategies.

Participants also expected advice about navigating the rules governing return-to-work in their disability benefits programs, and advice about disclosing their HIV status to potential employers. One participant was expecting:

“... to know what were the repercussions of going off disability, what was going to happen if the job or my health isn't working out, and how I was going to account for the ... lapsed time that I was on disability, that I wasn't working.”

For recent immigrants, the need may revolve more generally around how to get established in the Canadian workforce in the field in which they are qualified:

“I expected to get information about how I can get a better job ... I studied in a different country so for me it was difficult to find a job in the field I had studied. I was expecting maybe training or something ... information about what I can do ... to get a job – a better job, a professional job.”

Experiences of EA

Participants generally interpreted their experience positively, and attributed their positive experiences to the diligence and resourcefulness of the EA consultants. For example, one participant stated:

“They helped me a great deal with my resumé, showed me how to set it up so we could avoid that gap in employment. They did it in a way that wasn’t a chronological resumé but rather a functional resumé, which I didn’t even know about ... And then [consultant] did a mock interview which went a long way to boost my confidence.”

Another participant described his experience with his EA consultant as “excellent”. This participant also referred to another positive quality demonstrated by the EA consultants, namely the ability to put him “in touch with the right people [he] needed to talk to” One participant also described as “very helpful” the consultant’s ability to intervene on his behalf with ODSP and EI staff because “[consultant] will call these people up and speak their language”.

Participants also reported that EA assisted them with developing tools and strategies to market themselves to prospective employers, including cover letters, job search strategies and techniques, and simulated interviews. One participant in particular reported that EA provided “job trials like scenarios where I’d be working in a simulated job situation”

However, participants also raised a number of concerns about their experience of EA. As with the positive experiences outlined above, these concerns related to some aspects of the consultants’ performance. Participants complained that the consultants were not particularly accessible (i.e., were very busy, difficult to reach, slow to respond to clients, and the spacing of appointments was too long). For example:

“It would be at least a week before my phone call would be returned and sometimes when you’re on disability, or trying to come up with a plan, or make things happen, a week later seems a long time ... I set up an appointment [today] and it’s not until two weeks from now.”

Some participants also questioned the quality of referrals to other agencies. They were either disappointed with the quality of service from the agency to which they were referred, or felt that the EA consultants might not have referred them to the appropriate agencies. One participant raised an experience when he was referred to another agency “because of legal issues surrounding ODSP and returning to work”:

“I was referred to [agency 1] to supposedly get this information about what I could do, what I could make, what I couldn’t do, where to follow through on everything, and the experience was nerve racking at first and it got worse ... I found it a lot easier to go to [agency 2] and have them explain everything under the ‘law’ ... [Going to agency 1] was a referral that I thought was part of the process. Had I known that I could have gotten better information at [agency 2] in the first place, I would have bypassed [agency 1] altogether.”

The assessment of clients for job readiness was also a problem. According to some participants, each client should be assessed for job readiness based on the individual’s personal and life circumstances. Accordingly, assessing an individual’s job readiness was like “taking their pulse”. “Work,” in this participant’s view “isn’t isolated ...[it] is related to so many things.”

Deciding to return to work

Focus group participants were almost unanimous that the need to improve their financial situation was an important motivator for returning to work. The low levels of income that participants received from government disability and unemployment programs and private insurance was insufficient for their continued well-being.

However, returning to work meant more than gaining a measure of financial independence. Having a job was an opportunity for participants to do something productive and to re-define their HIV status. One participant spoke of returning to work as a rejection of being labelled as a “disabled person”. This participant wanted to “rejoin the rest of society in a productive way”. Another participant expressed this view as follows:

“You start to think about rebuilding your life ...rebuilding your dreams, rebuilding your faith and your confidence in yourself to just go back out there and go after all your dreams again.”

However, participants return to work at the risk of losing their disability benefits. This means that participants may no longer be able to afford the expensive drugs to treat their HIV/AIDS or, if their health deteriorated to the point that they had to stop working, they may find themselves without any means of support. Participants agreed in very strong terms that benefits programs (specifically ODSP) did not adequately facilitate the process of returning to work, and undermined the process of getting back on benefits if the work experience ended prematurely. One participant expressed the lack of support from his benefits program as follows:

“They kept me down ... in this little gutter where they were happy they could walk all over you ... and ignore you ... ‘oh well, if you go to school then you’re capable of working’. Boom, you’re off! Now the stress that this one statement created in me sent me into such a panic for six months.”

However, participants also agreed that EA helped them to understand the risks associated with returning to work, and the consultants interceded with their benefits programs to clarify the complex rules and regulations governing return-to-work. In these cases, participants reported that they received positive support from their benefit programs as a result of efforts made on their behalf by the EA consultants.

Finding a job, or not

A few participants were successful in finding jobs that met their needs. One participant described a particularly desirable outcome as follows:

“I had my interview and I had the skills that were in demand ... I started working [part time] because I wasn’t sure that I could go from not working at all to working five days a week full-time.”

However, some participants felt discouraged, perhaps even despondent, at not having found work:

“You just get to the point of like why do I even bother applying ... because I don’t even get a call or an interview.”

This led to the suggestion that clients needed a support group for people who were looking for work – “just an eight week ... group to come together and recharge yourself.” At the other extreme, a fear was expressed that as more people with HIV returned to work, providers of insurance and benefit programs may require that all HIV-positive individuals return to work (i.e., HIV “is just another chronic thing that can be treatable and you can go back to work”).

Challenges facing Active clients and suggestions to improve EA

It is evident from the focus group interviews that clients face a number of challenges with implications for EA. These include:

- lack of adequate information on what EA offers
- lack of counselling with respect to job readiness assessment
- referrals from EA to other agencies that do not seem to serve clients’ interest
- difficulty in getting appointments with EA consultants
- shortage of jobs for which clients can apply
- unsupportive or inordinately complex benefits programs

The idea (or perhaps misconception) that EA operated a job bank was somewhat contentious. Some participants insisted that it did, and others that it did not, but most attributed this difference in opinion to a lack of clarity about what EA offered and did not offer. On the whole, participants responded as follows to a direct question on suggested improvements to EA:

- more follow-up with clients
- better explanation of all the services in the in-take process, and more clarity about what EA will do for clients
- providing more services
- expanding the network of potential employers
- more deliberate advocacy with ODSP and insurance companies to make them more flexible
- more prompt attention to calls from clients
- make job postings available as computerized listings
- contacting clients who had previously taken computer courses each time a new course became available (e.g., clients would might have taken basic word processing should be contacted when an advanced course became available).

Understanding Needs and Expectations – Focus Groups with Inactive Clients

Expectations of EA

In common with the Active participants, Inactive participants were expecting to get jobs or job referrals. One participant was clear that he perceived EA to be more like a headhunting agency.

Perhaps more appropriately, participants expected EA to prepare them to find jobs by providing relevant guidance and support. This expectation included creating resumés, opportunities to upgrade their skills, and assistance with job searches. Participants also expected counselling about how to manage HIV while participating in the workforce. One participant claimed that he did not know what to expect, though he wanted to get a job or to get leads based on his work experience.

Experiences with EA

Many participants related a number of distinctly positive experiences, including helpful advice about their benefit programs, improved ability to market themselves, and help in setting and assessing their employment goals. Some participants appear to have exceeded their expectations:

“I expected ... that I would essentially be presented with a potential client [i.e., employer] who might be a match for me but I got advice on my resumé, advice on my job search ... and some mentoring. I also had information on agencies available for assistance if I was not able to find work and the requirements therein.”

In contrast, other participants had quite the opposite experience:

“I think my expectations were much higher than what I experienced. I thought there would be more outreach, more corporations on board, more temp agencies possibly on board ... I thought there would be more on tap.”

“I expected ... higher end training – not how to turn on a computer but how to upgrade your existing skills into another level.”

On balance, Inactive participants described rather negative experiences of EA compared to Active participants. Some were quite strident in their assessment, describing the experience as a waste of time or even a feeling of being exploited:

“I found the whole process really frustrating ... for six months I never got a single job interview, I never got any leads ... I just felt like I kept calling [consultant] and coming in for interviews [with the consultant].”

“[consultant] wanted me to work at ACT on their computers and I did that for three days and I didn't feel like I was learning anything. I just thought it was a great way for ACT to get free labour out of me.”

Participants were clearly divided in their experience of follow-up by the EA consultants. Some participants were encouraged by the follow-up:

“The individual follow-up was great ... there was always ‘how are you doing with the job search”

Other participants noted that there was neither follow-up nor follow-through:

“... they said that ‘we like to interview you and find out what type of work you want and then go out and find the employers to match you with’ but the employers were never found.”

Participants who were concerned by the lack of follow-up speculated about whether the consultants were effectively a team. In at least one instance, there appears to have been an obvious misunderstanding the consultant and the client:

“My goal was to get a job and [consultant] discussed with me whether or not I should get a skill enhancement. I thought that I had been in the workforce for enough years that I didn't need to go back to school for any upgrading and skills ... No matter what direction I went, the staff could come up with a counter argument to say why my direction didn't seem to be.”

Though EA generally did help participants to understand why or how they may risk their income benefits by returning to work, some participants still felt the consultants were somewhat vague on how returning to work could affect their status with the benefit programs:

“This [returning to work] was not in any way presented to me as being a problem. They did allude that there may be problems, but nobody seemed to have the bottom line of what the problem was ... I don’t think they were aggressive enough in getting the right information from the government.”

Similar to Active participants, members of the Inactive group expressed frustration with the quality of referrals from EA to other agencies – either the agencies to which they were referred did not provide quality service, or EA did not provide options that made sense. One participant described an experience where the agency to which he was referred just reviewed the rules governing the participant’s benefit program, which could just as easily been done by an EA consultant.

Despite these criticisms, there was some recognition that the EA did offer a unique service. At a minimum, PHAs who wanted to (re)enter the workforce had somewhere to turn for assistance:

“I found them useful in that they were encouraging for me. I wasn’t getting a lot of support outside of a place like this, so I felt somebody was interested in my goal and offering assistance to make it happen.”

Deciding to return to work

Participants did not leave any doubt about wanting to increase their incomes by returning to work. However, as with the Active clients, they expected to boost their quality of life and self-esteem. One participant was especially forthright about all these reasons:

For quality of life – I mean when I went on disability it was ‘well, this is the next step down’ ... so six years later and you’re sitting at home, you have no money, you have nothing and you’ve isolated yourself. You’re tired of making up excuses why you can’t go out for dinner with people because you’re tired of people having to pay for you. It was just – it’s time. Can I do this for the next 20 years? I couldn’t ... I can’t for my own self-esteem.”

Despite their good intentions and motivation to return to work, participants unanimously feared that they would lose their benefits and be left stranded if their entry into the work force turned out badly. In fact, they felt marginalized and penalized by their benefit programs. These sorts of comment were made most often in respect to ODSP. Participants received material support from their benefits programs only through the efforts of EA. For example:

“So they [EI] funded my schooling and let me stay on EI so in that respect, yes my income benefits program did support me, but had it not been for Employment Action, I probably would not have known about this program in the first place.”

Employment experiences

Some participants were successful finding work. One participant, who started his own company after searching unsuccessfully for employment, described his experience as follows:

“I started my own company because there was no jobs being offered me ... I didn't feel that I had the support to be really qualified for a real career that was going to offer me forty or fifty thousand a year, and it just seemed a lot more feasible to rely on my own talents and start my own business where I was in control.”

Another participant spoke at length about his success in finding rewarding employment outside the field that he had chosen initially, with assistance from EA:

“I was finding frustration ... finding a position in my career so I started thinking about looking outside and that's essentially where Employment Action was instrumental. For personal reasons I was looking for something a lot less stressful ... I actually ended up starting something new ... I'm working for an amazing company and it's actually a gay company ... In knowing that I have a lot of satisfaction in my work, I don't make a ton of money, but I don't need to. I've picked up a lot of great skills along the way – interpersonal and leadership skills and things like that, which I wasn't really getting a lot of in my former career.”

Some participants also spoke about volunteering as a way of assessing their capacity to function in a workplace environment again. Volunteering can therefore lead to a decision to seek paid employment.

Challenges facing inactive clients and suggestions to improve EA

The discussion above highlights a number of program-related challenges experienced by inactive clients:

- Lack of clear and unambiguous information on what EA is about
- Not enough follow-up or follow-through by the EA consultants, and an apparent absence of team work among the consultants
- Shortage of jobs and job leads
- Inadequate referrals to other agencies
- Limited opportunity for interaction among EA participants
- Problems in dealing with their benefits programs (i.e., the programs do not appear to support people's need to return to work)

When asked directly about how the program may be improved, participants identified the following opportunities:

- Develop a (larger) database of potential employers

- Develop a list of employment opportunities similar to a job bank or EI office
- Post jobs on a website or in a binder that is easily accessible
- Enhance team work among EA consultants
- Improve communication between the consultants and clients, especially the length of time consultants take to return calls
- Assist clients with clothing appropriate for interviews
- Facilitate a support group for people who recently re-entered the workforce
- Implement more follow-up with clients
- Clarify EA's mission or mandate, and the specific services available.

Comparing the Perspectives of Active and Inactive Clients

Active and Inactive participants shared a number of similar needs, experiences and outcomes (Table 4). Participants in both groups expected to find paid employment as a consequence of participating in EA. In both groups finding a job was the primary expectation, though there was widespread interest in getting the help, support and counselling that would prepare them to re-enter the workforce. Active and Inactive participants also expressed similar motivations and reasons for wanting to return to work, namely, to improve their income situation and to reclaim or improve their self-esteem and the value of their lives.

On balance, evidence from the focus group interviews suggests EA is meeting core needs and expectations, namely, that clients are receiving assistance and counselling on how to prepare themselves to (re)enter the workforce (help with resumes, training and upgrading, etc), advice about their benefits programs, and advice and counselling about managing HIV in the workplace, in a supportive environment (Table 4). The survey responses also indicate that this is the case. Focus group responses also support the notion that clients boost their self-confidence while participating in EA. The survey of Active clients, despite its limitations for understanding the breadth of clients' needs, supports to some extent the distinctions outlined in Table 4. Active clients availed themselves of advice and tools to prepare themselves to re-enter the workforce, and acknowledged the support they received from the EA consultants.

However, focus group participants are also experiencing unmet needs and challenges in a number of areas. Participants mostly wanted to find jobs, but clearly did not. There was also frustration at the lack of follow-up by their consultants. Moreover, given their disappointment at not being able to find jobs, participants were also confused about the mandate and purpose of EA, and suggested that EA needed to attract a greater network of potential employers. There was almost universal agreement that their benefit programs appeared to be working against clients' best interests, despite the skillful advice and intervention from their EA consultants. The range and breadth of these unmet needs and challenges suggest that the EA consultants should consider a range of options for redesigning the program.

Table 4. Client-based issues for Employment Action: needs, challenges and suggested improvements*

	Active participants	Inactive participants
Needs and expectations substantially met		
Assistance/support preparing to find jobs (i.e., training and upgrading, resumés, job search strategies, etc.)	✓	✓
Advice on benefits programs regarding return-to-work	✓	✓
Advice/counselling on managing HIV in workplace	✓**	✓
Supportive consultants	✓	✓
Build self-confidence	✓	✓
Unmet needs and challenges		
Jobs (consistent with individual goals)	✓	✓
Job leads		✓
Getting established in the work force (for immigrants)	✓	
Unsupportive benefits programs	✓	✓
Navigating and negotiating benefits programs	✓	✓
Lack of adequate information on what EA offers	✓	✓
Lack of adequate job readiness assessment	✓	
Questionable referrals to other agencies	✓	✓
Difficulty in getting appointments with EA consultants	✓	✓
Not enough follow-up with clients	✓	✓
Limited opportunities for interaction among participants		✓
Suggested improvements		
More follow-up/better communication with EA clients	✓	✓
Enhance teamwork among consultants		✓
Clarify mandate/better explanation of EA services	✓	✓
More services	✓	
Expand network or database of potential employers	✓	✓
More advocacy with benefits programs (esp. ODSP)	✓	
Develop list (computerized or bound) of job postings	✓	✓
Assist clients with clothing for interviews		✓
Support group or job club for clients looking for work or recently hired	✓	✓

*See also p. 31

**This emerged in the personal interviews (see p. 26).

One issue that may appear contradictory is counselling and advice about benefits programs related to return-to-work issues. It is listed in all three areas of Table 4. In the focus groups (and also in the personal interviews discussed in a later section of this report), participants spoke at length about their experiences and fears related to benefits programs. They acknowledged the important role that EA played on their behalf, but still

interpreted their benefit programs as a substantial challenge. In other words, they are expecting that EA should play an even greater advocacy role with respect to benefit programs.

Individual Perspectives

Seven Active clients and the same number of Inactive clients were interviewed in person. As outlined previously, the purpose of these personal interviews was to understand clients' experiences, needs and expectations on a personal level, and to explore personal issues that may have been inappropriate for a focus group format (e.g., issues related to health, income, and some types of experiences with EA).

Active participants

Table 5 summarizes the profile of Active interviewees. They are mostly men in the 30-49 years age category. Four have been educated to college or university level. They all have low incomes that are considerably less than the highest income that they have ever earned. Only one person had neither participated in any training/upgrading courses nor found employment through the EA program.

Table 5. Active clients interviewed in person

	Number of interviewees (total = 7)
Men	5
Aged 30-49	7
College degree or university diploma	4
Recent or fairly recent immigrants	3
Training/upgrading courses as part of EA program	4
Paid employment as part of EA program	2
Current monthly income	
\$1,000 or less	3
\$1,001 – 1,500	1
more than \$1,500	3
Highest monthly income ever*	
\$2,500 or less	0
\$2,501 – 4,000	3
more than \$4,000	3

*One interviewee had missing data.

The Active interviewees share many of the positive experiences that emerged from the focus groups – the helpfulness of the EA consultants, the positive impact on their self-confidence, help with defining and setting goals, and good advice about their benefits

programs. However, unlike the focus group interviews, two participants did draw attention to the helpful advice they received about disclosing one's HIV status in the workplace. For example:

"It's a little concerning and answering questions around if I did go in for an interview am I disclosing my status or not. I mean, I know I don't have, but on the other hand I would rather be open and honest with an employer than not. And so, there is a whole bunch of issues that they've been actually helping with. Things that I probably hadn't really thought about when I started the program."

In addition to these positive experiences, interviewees also discussed their expectations of the program. In general, these expectations generally had satisfactory outcomes (e.g., acquiring tools to market oneself, etc.). Once again, however, participants who expected to find paid employment did not appear to have achieved this. There was also some concern about the difficulty of getting appointments with the EA consultants:

"The only thing that was frustrating was how to get in touch with a counsellor. Appointments need to be made well in advance. So you'd call up and want to talk to somebody and it would be like, 'sure, I can fit you in two to three weeks'."

Interviewees stated that the EA was an invaluable service for clarifying and negotiating return-to-work issues associated with their benefits programs (ODSP and CPP). This endorsement is particularly important in view of risk that clients associate with their decision to return to work:

"You have to be very, very careful with them [CPP] because once you start looking for work, they can cut you off. If I go back to work full-time, I have to give up to my disability immediately. I have ninety days."

"When I go back to work for a new company I will lose all my drug benefits. I'm not on medication at the moment, so that's not an issue, but if I ever had to go back on, it could. It's kind of silly. Can I go back part time? The answer was no. You either go back full time or nothing. So. It's either jump with both feet and hope there's something to land on or it's don't jump and stay where you are."

Interviewees were also asked to identify the best job they ever had, and to explain their choice of job. This section of the interview was intended to develop an understanding of the qualities or attributes that made work interesting in the past, and may do so in the future. The "best jobs ever" included various levels of responsibility in advertising, the travel industry, and education. One interviewee had also operated his own business previously. Interviewees enumerated the following attributes that made those jobs special:

- Money (*"the money wasn't too bad"; "I ended up like good money."*)
- Opportunity to show initiative (*"I felt I was free to do a lot of stuff."; "It was a pretty independent situation."*)

- Travel (“*just travelling and seeing the world*”; “*a lot of benefits in terms of travel*”)
- Sense of accomplishment (“*I was promoted fast in the company*”; “*they [customers] appreciated me ... really liked my work.*”).

Interviewees were also encouraged to speak about their lives shortly prior to joining EA and how they felt about themselves since. Typical pre-EA accounts referred to nervousness, depression, anxiety, and lack of motivation. In contrast, interviewees reported feeling better about themselves since becoming involved in EA. These assessments indicate that participants feel productive and useful:

“I think it’s just that I felt like I was doing something, and not just sitting around not doing anything. I’m feeling better about myself because at least I’m doing something with my life as oppose to sitting at home and watching TV. I am feeling a lot better than I was by far.”

Moreover, they are willing and motivated to deal with the physical demands associated with participating in the workforce:

“I have been a little bit tired, having to return to work, but I wasn’t depressed. I was thrilled to be working in my chosen field and my health was fine.”

On the subject of how EA might be improved to better meet their needs, interviewees shared a number of familiar suggestions (e.g., hire more consultants, communication and networking opportunities for clients, etc.). In addition, it was suggested that EA program should be made more “culturally sensitive” (e.g., by offering materials or some services in languages other than English). Another suggestion referred to the necessity of more focussed advocacy with potential employers:

“It would be nice if there was a larger group of companies willing to hire people that were positive. So, maybe ACT’s advocacy in that sense as far as getting employers on side to hire people back that are living with HIV and AIDS would probably benefit a lot of people.”

Inactive participants

The seven Inactive interviewees are profiled in Table 6. They are mainly low-income men aged 30-49 years who have been educated to the tertiary level. Five of the interviewees had either participated in a training/upgrading course or had a job placement through EA. It is also evident that their incomes today are substantially less than the highest incomes that they ever earned from employment.

The Inactive interviewees expressed similar positive experiences of EA to those expressed in the focus groups and the personal interviews with Active clients, namely, that they were able to build self-confidence, that they developed tools to market themselves, and that the consultants were supportive. However, they also articulated

specific needs that may not have been met. As the focus group discussions demonstrate, these participants were all keen to find (full-time) employment. Though they acknowledge a number of areas in which EA could be considered successful, the idea of finding work (rather than being prepared to find work) was a recurring primary theme. For example, one interviewee stated:

“I wanted to make sure that my health would stay good and I wasn’t sure if I had the energy...and being out of the labour market for ten years, I wasn’t sure if I could make that commitment and working with other individuals again, I’d slowly want to move into that again.”

Table 6. Inactive clients interviewed in person

	Number of interviewees (total = 7)
Men	6
Aged 30-49	7
College degree or university diploma	6
Recent or fairly recent immigrants	3
Training/upgrading courses as part of EA program	3
Paid employment as part of EA program	3
Current monthly income	
\$1,000 or less	2
\$1,001 – 1,500	3
more than \$1,500	2
Highest monthly income ever	
\$2,500 or less	2
\$2,501 – 4,000	3
more than \$4,000	2

Participants also expected that EA would provide opportunities for personal development (i.e., not just finding a job, but finding employment that was fulfilling in a number of ways), for evaluating their goals, and for assessing their skills. When asked directly how EA may best meet their needs, interviewees reiterated a few specific lapses in the program related to the lack of timely follow-up by the consultants.

Participants were also asked to identify the best job they ever had, and to explain what made it special. The best jobs identified by interviewees range from those that need specialized training or preparation (e.g., accountant) to less specialized jobs in retail. The main qualities that made these jobs special were:

- Money (*“the money was not bad”*)
- Respect from colleagues (*“I had a lot of respect from the people who reported to me”; “acknowledged for the work I do”*)

- Sense of responsibility (“*I had a lot more responsibilities that I have now*”)
- Personal accomplishment (“*It was satisfying [doing this job] for low-income people*”; “*I was good at it, number 1.*”)
- Challenge (“*It was a challenging position.*”)

The responses not only illustrate the qualities or attributes that made previous employment fulfilling or rewarding; they also indicate to some extent what participants expect from a job even now.

Interviewees were also asked to reflect on their health prior to and after their involvement in EA. They mentioned feeling depressed, isolated and lonely before joining EA, and attributed these feelings to a number of triggers or reasons. For example:

“Isolation. Um, just personal things, uh not looking toward the future, not seeing the future, losing my partner.”

“Money. The first year, everybody is saying “come on around”-uh, I can’t afford it-“we’ll pay for you”-and then that’s fine and then you start having creative reasons why you can’t do it, or “I’m not feeling well” even though you look fine you start relying on your illness, I mean which is I think immoral for me to do....”

Many claimed to have experienced improved health with their participation in EA, and even attributed this to EA itself. Two more or less typical comments are as follows:

“It has improved, generally it’s better now, because my figures [CD4 counts] are much better than when I started, and they have gone up ... All the figures, everything is better now.”

“My health status is good, and my mental status is good. Because of the program [EA] and the courses I took through ACT, I started understanding and looking at the reasons of what was making me depressed and eliminating those barriers of what was wrong. Why am I depressed? And then changing the outlook for the future, and then realizing that it looks like I’m going to live after all.”

Comparing Active and Inactive individual perspectives

The personal interviews demonstrate that EA clients have previously had jobs and careers that were satisfying on various levels. By participating in EA, they draw on lessons and experiences from the past that may serve them well in the future.

Active and Inactive participants recorded a number of similar positive experiences that are consistent with the focus group results. They noted that the consultants were supportive and helpful, acknowledged the good advice and service regarding how to manage the challenges associated with the benefits programs, and benefited from their access to tools to market themselves (e.g., help with resumés, etc.). In addition, they

recounted that the program had a positive impact on some aspects of their emotional well-being (e.g., feeling more self-confident, feeling better about themselves, etc.).

Both groups of interviewees also spoke about similar challenges with the program, in a manner reminiscent of the focus groups. Getting appointments and follow-up from the consultants was a problem, as were the difficulties posed by their benefits programs in relation to return-to-work.

Regarding how the program may be improved, one new suggestion was that some program materials or even some activities should be available in languages other than English. Given the dominant countries of origin of immigrants to Toronto over the last 15 years, it may be beneficial to develop these ideas through a partnership with ethno-specific AIDS service organizations (ASOs) in Toronto.

Who Benefits (or not) from Employment Action

Probably all EA clients benefit to some degree from the program. General comments made in the survey, focus groups and personal interviews indicate this to be the case. Also, there was widespread agreement among the research participants that they benefited from assistance and support to prepare themselves to enter the workforce (e.g., training courses, advice with resumés, job search strategies, etc.), received very helpful advice about their benefits programs and about managing their HIV status in the workplace, and improved their self-confidence. They also acknowledged EA was a generally supportive environment managed by skillful consultants.

Nonetheless, the extent to which clients actually benefit from the program depends on their initial needs and expectations. All EA clients need jobs, and a substantial proportion expected that they would become employed during or by the end of their involvement with the program. That jobs did not materialize was a source of widespread disappointment and frustration. But this expectation (of finding jobs) is not necessarily erroneous. The main brochure to publicize EA lists “job placement” as one of the services available from the program. Without a definition of “job placement”, clients interpret it to mean that their participation in EA would culminate in paid employment. Moreover, at the start of EA in 1999 the consultants and project partners themselves assumed that the program outcomes would actually include clients’ re-entry to the workforce (i.e., clients would find jobs).

Two other factors influence whether clients will be able to achieve their employment goals. First, clients appear to enter the program without really appreciating how the rules and regulations of their specific benefit programs affect their ability to seek training or find paid employment. Therefore, despite the best efforts of the EA consultants, clients become frustrated that their benefit programs do not support their job or career ambitions. Second, as illustrated in Table 1, the number of Active clients is rather large, which puts pressure on the program consultants and probably contributes to the lack of adequate follow-up noted by the research participants.

Given the context just outlined, the clients most likely to benefit from EA are:

- those whose main motivation is to explore return-to-work options or seek discrete types of assistance rather than find employment in the short term;
- clients who are already somewhat familiar with the return-to-work challenges and opportunities associated with their benefits programs;
- clients who have been absent from the workforce for a relatively short period; and
- clients who already have experience in the Canadian workforce.

However, only a small proportion of survey respondents fit the profile outlined above. For example, of the 40 respondents who had ever worked in Canada, only 13 (one-third) had been unemployed for less than a year. Furthermore, only 19 of those 40 respondents did not list “getting a job” as a primary reason for joining EA (i.e., they were not attracted to the program primarily to find a job immediately). About half of those 19 respondents indicated that they joined EA to get advice on upgrading their skills, or to get help with their resume (i.e., for very specific help and advice to prepare themselves for re-entry to the workforce, rather than to find a job in the short term). In other words, only a very small proportion of survey respondents fit the profile of clients who are likely to benefit most from EA (i.e., who are re-entering the program after a relatively short absence, and whose reasons for being there can be fairly easily accommodated by the program).

Discussion and Recommendations

EA is a program for people who are HIV positive and who want to (re)enter the workforce after a period of absence due to their health situation. The survey data suggest that clients are mostly men in their 30s and 40s with fairly high levels of formal schooling. Data from the personal interviews also indicate that, consistent with their level of schooling, many have been previously successful in the workforce. Currently, however, their sources of income are mainly income support or other benefit programs, especially ODSP. A noticeable minority immigrated to Canada in the last five to ten years. They expect and receive a range of benefits from EA, even though most knew “nothing or almost nothing” about EA prior to enrolling. Except for the fact that they have been out of the workforce for varying lengths of time, their levels of education and previous experiences in the workforce suggest that they should be relatively easy to place in paid employment.

The initial list of needs, challenges and suggested improvements displayed in Table 4 was based mainly on the focus groups but augmented by the survey responses. Two additions to the list of suggested improvements arose from the personal interviews. EA should:

1. identify potential employers who are willing to hire PHAs (based on the survey and personal interviews); and
2. make some EA materials (and possibly some of the services) available in languages other than English (based on personal interviews).

The idea of identifying PHA-friendly employers may perhaps be captured under one of the improvements initially listed in Table 4 (p. 24), namely, “expand(ing) the network or database of potential employers.” The second item (making materials available in other languages) opens the possibility of partnerships with ethno-specific ASOs in Toronto. The various challenges and suggested improvements collapse into three strategic issues – consultants’ availability (lack of follow-up, etc), the breadth of expectations and services (Is the program too ambitious? What role should the program play with respect to advice, counselling or advocacy related to benefits programs? What is the role of EA in finding jobs for clients?), and confusion about EA’s mandate and services. Decisions about these issues are likely to influence how the other challenges may be resolved.

As a way of addressing the problem of lack of follow-up with clients and the difficulty of getting appointments with consultants, some participants in the focus groups and personal interviews suggested that more EA consultants should be hired. This suggestion is not listed in Table 4, but may be worth considering. However, a decision to increase the number of consultants should be based on a good understanding of why follow-up with clients is a problem and why clients experience difficulty getting appointments.

Staff turnover during the last year may be the cause of these problems. ACT employed three EA consultants at the time the proposal for this needs assessment was being written (i.e., September 2001). One consultant left ACT before the project commenced (i.e., prior to March 2002). By the summer of 2002 just one consultant remained. Despite attempts to recruit new consultants, these positions remained vacant for several months. At the time of writing this report (i.e., March 2003), two consultants were in place, but ACT had made a decision not to fill the third position for at least a year. Therefore, it is entirely possible that staff turnover may be at the root of several challenges identified in Table 4. But hiring additional consultants is not necessarily the best remedy. It may be feasible to hire administrative expertise (e.g., an administrative assistant), which would free up the consultants to devote more time to clients directly.

Another approach to addressing the challenges and improving EA might entail rationalizing the services that are offered. This approach may address a few issues simultaneously - the availability of consultants, confusion about the mandate - and would make sense if there were reason to believe that EA was too ambitious in relation to available resources. EA would then offer a more limited and focussed set of services, such as practical support to prepare clients to find jobs (i.e., help with resumés, etc) that already appear to be successful. This more focussed set of services may also include advocacy with benefits programs, where EA already has a measure of success but is still a significant challenge for clients.

Clients’ confusion about EA’s mandate, or what it offers, is another issue that has implications for the extent to which the program meets clients’ needs. Clients’ needs may exceed the scope and capacity of the program if they (i.e., clients and potential clients) do not have access to clear and consistent messages that explain EA precisely. For example, many clients believe that EA is a placement service or job bank, even though it does not operate as such. To some extent the agency partners (ACT and

TPWAF) are responsible for this confusion because, at its inception, EA was promoted in those terms. It is evident that, whether or not changes are made to the content or mandate of EA, serious thought should be given to how the program is marketed and promoted.

Finally, in the interval between formal evaluations and needs assessments, the EA consultants may informally evaluate the status of the program by monitoring client profiles. This periodic monitoring may illustrate the type of clients, and may provide some insight on what needs are more pressing. However, at the current time the EA client database is inadequate to support this kind of activity. Traditionally, ASOs and social service organizations are loath to store all but the most rudimentary personal information about clients and service users. But for a program such as EA, where clients expect definite and specific outcomes in a time-limited manner (e.g., getting specific training, finding a job, etc.), it is important to design and manage a client database that is more helpful to the consultants and project partners. The database may contain, for all clients, a few key socio-demographic measures, as well as a few strategic employment-related indices.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that Employment Action succeeds in meeting some core needs of PHAs who want to (re)enter the workforce. These include advice on resumés and other practical skills, knowledge and support to prepare clients for their re-entry into the workforce; advice and counselling on managing HIV in the workplace; and assistance with managing some of the challenges associated with their benefit programs (such as ODSP). Clients also found EA to be a supportive environment managed by skilled consultants. In addition, they noted that EA had a positive impact on their self-confidence.

However, clients articulated needs or challenges that are not being addressed. In particular, they expressed frustration with not finding jobs and with the level of follow-up by the EA consultants, and were confused by EA's mandate and purpose. While acknowledging the valuable assistance, advice and personal advocacy from the consultants, they still maintained that their benefit programs undermined the principle of return-to-work. These are the more obvious and strongly voiced problems from a longer list.

Obviously, not all needs can or should be met in a single program. The needs analysis raises a few important questions – What needs should (or can) the program reasonably address? What services are essential to meeting these needs and challenges? Answering these questions would require the project partners (AIDS Committee of Toronto and the Toronto People with AIDS Foundation) to reflect on the mandate and objectives of the program, and how the program may be marketed and promoted. Otherwise, the Employment Action risks being overwhelmed by needs, demands and expectations that, while legitimate, may threaten its sustainability.

Appendix 1 Survey of Active Clients

Employment Action Needs Assessment Questionnaire

Please read the letter that came with this questionnaire before you answer the questions on the following pages.

You will answer many of the questions by checking (✓) a box or boxes from the list that comes with the question. For some questions, you will write your answer on the lines or spaces provided with the question.

In addition to answering the questions, you may write any other thoughts or comments about Employment Action on the last page (page 8).

For your convenience, we have included a self-addressed envelope with postage already paid. *Within the next two weeks, please complete the questionnaire and mail it to Employment Action in the envelope provided.*

Thank you very much for participating in this survey.

Tell us about your experience with the Employment Action program [Questions 1 to 21]

1. **When did you join the Employment Action program?** Write the month and year on the lines provided below. If you can't remember the month and year, check the box that says "Can't remember".

_____ Can't remember
month year

2. **When was your last scheduled office appointment with an Employment Action consultant?** If you can't remember the month and year, check the box that says "Can't remember".

_____ Can't remember
month year

3. **Why did you join the Employment Action program? [Check all the reasons that apply]**

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> to get help on how to look for a job | <input type="checkbox"/> to improve my job interview skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to get a job | <input type="checkbox"/> to get help with my resume |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to get advice on upgrading my skills | <input type="checkbox"/> to get on-the-job experience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to get advice on benefits (ODSP, CPP, LTD, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to find out about the types of jobs that are available | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to get help choosing the type of jobs that I should try to get | |

4. **What kind of help or advice did you get (are you getting) from the Employment Action program? [Check all the different types of help or advice that you received]**

- help on how to look for a job
- advice on how to apply for a job
- advice on training and upgrading my skills
- help with finding where I could get training and upgrading
- advice/help me to get advice on benefits (ODSP, CPP, LTD, etc.)
- advice on the different types of jobs that are available
- help with choosing the type of jobs that I should try to get
- help with doing job interviews
- help with my resume
- helped me to get on-the-job experience
- advice on how to improve my language skills (i.e., English as a Second Language or ESL)
- advice on if I should tell an employer about my health status
- advice on how to get references
- help with writing a cover letter for job applications
- advice on how to conduct myself at work
- Other: _____

5. **How did you find out about the Employment Action program? [Check all that apply]**

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> from a friend, partner or family member | <input type="checkbox"/> from a flier |
| <input type="checkbox"/> from an advertisement in a newspaper or magazine | <input type="checkbox"/> from an Employment Action brochure |
| <input type="checkbox"/> through a referral from a health care provider | <input type="checkbox"/> through a community event |
| <input type="checkbox"/> through a referral from another agency | <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____ |

6. How much did you know about the Employment Action program before you joined?

- A lot
- A fair amount
- A little
- Nothing or almost nothing
- Can't remember

7. At the time you joined Employment Action, was there a particular type of work or job that you wanted to do?

- Yes
- No → *go to question 9*
- Not sure → *go to question 9*

8. After you joined Employment Action, did you change your mind about the type of work that you wanted to do?

- Yes
- No

9. After you became involved in Employment Action, what type of job or work did you decide was best for you (e.g., customer service, actor, accountant)? Write the type of job or jobs on the lines provided below.

10. Is your employment goal to work full time or part time?

- Full time
- Part time
- Not sure

11. Have you been employed (working for pay) while taking part in the Employment Action program?

- Yes
- No → *go to question 14*

12. Did Employment Action help you to get paid employment while taking part in the program?

- Yes
- No → *go to question 15*

13. What type of paid employment did the Employment Action program help you to get? Write the jobs that Employment Action helped you to get, from the first to the most recent; check if each job was full time or part time; enter “contract” or “permanent”, whichever is correct; write the date when you started working and approximately how long you worked at each job.

Paid positions	Full time (FT) or part time (PT)?	Contract or permanent?	Date (month, year) you started	How long did/will you work?
i.	<input type="checkbox"/> FT <input type="checkbox"/> PT			
ii.	<input type="checkbox"/> FT <input type="checkbox"/> PT			
iii.	<input type="checkbox"/> FT <input type="checkbox"/> PT			

Go to question 15

14. If you have not worked for pay while participating in Employment Action, please check all the reasons why.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> problems with my health | <input type="checkbox"/> no vacancies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> risk of losing my benefits (e.g., CPP, ODSP, LTD) | <input type="checkbox"/> gaps in my resume |
| <input type="checkbox"/> not ready to work yet | <input type="checkbox"/> lack of up-to-date skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> have not looked for paid employment | <input type="checkbox"/> childcare responsibilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lack of computer knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lack of knowledge about how to find work | |

15. Have you been successful so far in getting unpaid work placements as part of your program with Employment Action?

- Yes
 No → **go to question 17**

16. What type of unpaid job placements did the Employment Action program help you to get? Write the names of all the unpaid placements that Employment Action helped you to get, from the first to the most recent; check if each placement was full time or part time; write the date you started working, and approximately how long you worked at each placement.

Unpaid job placements	Full time or part time?	Date (month and year) you started	How long did/will you work?
i.	<input type="checkbox"/> Full time <input type="checkbox"/> Part time		
ii.	<input type="checkbox"/> Full time <input type="checkbox"/> Part time		
iii.	<input type="checkbox"/> Full time <input type="checkbox"/> Part time		

Go to question 18

17. If you have not done any unpaid work placements as part of your program with Employment Action, please check all the reasons why.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I only want to work for pay | <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't feel that it would benefit me |
| <input type="checkbox"/> None were available in my field | <input type="checkbox"/> Was not interested |
| <input type="checkbox"/> None were available at the time | <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't have money for tools/equipment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Didn't have enough money for transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> I am/was not ready |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have/had childcare responsibilities | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

18. Have you taken (or are you now taking) any training or upgrading to improve your job skills since you joined the Employment Action program?

- Yes
- No → *go to question 21*

19. What job-related training or upgrading have you taken (or are now taking) since you joined Employment Action? *Write the names of each course or program you have taken, the name of the organization that offered each course or program, and how long you took the each course or program.*

Name of each course or program	Name of the organization that offered the course or program	How long was/is the course or program?
i.		
ii.		
iii.		

20. How helpful was/is the training or upgrading for the type of work that you want to do?

- Very helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Slightly/a little helpful
- Not helpful
- Not sure

Go to question 22

21. If you have not taken any job-related training or upgrading since you joined Employment Action, please check all the reasons why.

- Cannot afford it
- Not eligible for OSAP
- Benefits don't cover training
- Courses were/are not available
- Training would take too long
- Don't have the qualifications to get into a program
- Haven't got around to it yet
- Other: _____

Tell us about your work history before you joined Employment Action
[Questions 22 to 26]

22. Before you joined the Employment Action program, did you ever work for pay in Canada?

- Yes
- No → *go to question 26*

23. Were you employed at the time that you joined the Employment Action program?

- Yes
- No → *go to question 25*

24. What type of work were you doing at the time you joined the Employment Action program?

Write the type of job or work you were doing when you joined Employment Action; check whether the job was full time or part time; enter "contract" or "permanent", whichever is correct; then write the length of time that you were working at this job.

Type of job or work	Full time (FT) or part time (PT)?	Contract or permanent	How long you were working at this job.
	<input type="checkbox"/> FT <input type="checkbox"/> PT		

Go to question 27

25. At the time that you joined the Employment Action program, how long were you unemployed or without work since your last job? Write the length of time that you were unemployed or without work. If you can't remember how long, check the box that says "Can't remember".

_____ Can't remember

26. If you were unemployed or not working at the time you joined the Employment Action program, please check all the reasons why.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> problems with my health | <input type="checkbox"/> gaps in my resume |
| <input type="checkbox"/> risk of losing my benefits (e.g., CPP, ODSP, LTD) | <input type="checkbox"/> lack of up-to-date skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lack of computer knowledge | <input type="checkbox"/> childcare responsibilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lack of knowledge about how to find work | <input type="checkbox"/> my contract had ended/I was laid off |
| <input type="checkbox"/> no vacancies | <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____ |

Tell us about yourself now [Questions 27 to 38]

27. What is your gender?

- Female Male Transgender

28. What is your current level of education? [Check only one answer]

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than grade 12 | <input type="checkbox"/> University graduate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High school graduate | <input type="checkbox"/> College graduate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Some university or college courses, but did not graduate | <input type="checkbox"/> Apprenticeship |

29. What was your main income source in the month before you joined the Employment Action program, and what is your main income source now?

<p><i>In the month before I joined the EA program</i></p> <input type="checkbox"/> ODSP <input type="checkbox"/> ODSP/ CPP <input type="checkbox"/> CPP <input type="checkbox"/> CPP/ LTD <input type="checkbox"/> LTD <input type="checkbox"/> OW (Welfare) <input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/> Partner/spouse/family <input type="checkbox"/> Pension <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> EI	<p><i>Now</i></p> <input type="checkbox"/> ODSP <input type="checkbox"/> ODSP/ CPP <input type="checkbox"/> CPP <input type="checkbox"/> CPP/ LTD <input type="checkbox"/> LTD <input type="checkbox"/> OW (Welfare) <input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/> Partner/spouse/family <input type="checkbox"/> Pension <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> EI
---	---

30. How much is your personal income each month?

- \$0-\$500 \$501-\$1,000 \$1,001-\$1,500 more than \$1,500

31. How many people (including yourself) do you support financially? *Count yourself as “1”, and write the number in the space provided below.*

_____ people.

32. Do you live with a spouse or partner?

- Yes No

33. Look at the age groups below. Which age group do you fit into?

- Less than 20 years old 30-39 years old
 20-24 years old 40-49 years old
 25-29 years old 50 years or older

34. Did you immigrate to Canada as an adult?

- Yes, and I have lived in Canada for _____ years.
 No

35. Are you working for pay now?

- Yes
 No → **go to question 38**

36. What type of work are you doing now? *Write the job or type of work in the space provided; check whether the job is full time or part time; write “contract” or “permanent”, whichever is correct; and then write the date you started the job.*

Paid positions	Full time (FT) or Part time (PT)?		Contract or permanent	Date (month and year) you started
	<input type="checkbox"/> FT	<input type="checkbox"/> PT		
i.	<input type="checkbox"/> FT	<input type="checkbox"/> PT		
ii.	<input type="checkbox"/> FT	<input type="checkbox"/> PT		

37. What type of benefits are you receiving through your employer? *Check “Yes” for each benefit you are receiving from your employer, or “No” for every benefit that you are not receiving.*

- | | | | | | |
|--------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Drugs | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | Life insurance | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Dental | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | Long term disability | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Vision | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | Pension plan | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

38. If you knew someone who needed help from a program like Employment Action, would you recommend Employment Action to him or her?

- Yes
 No
 Not sure

If you have any additional comments about Employment Action, please write them below.

Thank you very much for your time and patience.

Appendix 2

Focus group discussion issues

1. What did you expect from Employment Action when you joined?
2. How would you describe your experience with Employment Action? What worked well for you with Employment Action? What didn't work well? What barriers, if any, did you experience with the Employment Action program?
3. Why did you want to (return to) work? Did you risk losing your income benefits if you started working? Were you prepared to deal with this risk? What role, if any, did Employment Action play in helping you to understand the risk?
4. Did you have an employment goal when you signed up for Employment Action? If no, did Employment Action help you to set your employment goal and how? If yes, did Employment Action help you to decide whether the goal you already had was appropriate for you and how?
5. Did Employment Action help you to develop tools and strategies to market yourself (e.g., resume, job search strategies, interviewing skills, etc.)? If yes, how useful were these tools and strategies?
6. Does/did your income benefits program (ODSP, CPP, LTD, OW) or EI provide you with enough support to get the type of training or upgrading that you need for stable employment? Please explain.
7. Did Employment Action do (Is Employment Action doing) enough to help you get appropriate training, workplace experience or employment? Please explain. What should the program do (have done) to help you better?
8. Were you able to find paid employment (i.e., full time or part time work, or a paid work placement)? If yes, how did this happen? If no, why were you unable to find paid employment? What were your experiences after you started working?
9. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the Employment Action program?

Appendix 3a

Confidential interviews with current EA participants

1. How long have you been in the EA program?
PROBE: start date

2. Were you working at the time you joined the EA program?
*PROBE: **If not working:** Were there any reasons why you were not working? Did you have any income? What was your source of income?*

*PROBE: **If working:** What type of work were you doing? Did you want to be doing some other type of work? Why? What type of work?*

3. What type of employment experiences did you have in the years before you joined EA?
PROBE: How many different types of jobs have you had? In Canada, and outside of Canada?
What is the best job that you've ever had? When? Why do you think that job was the best? Why aren't you doing this job any longer?
What is the highest amount of income that you ever received from a job? When?

4. How was your health at the time when you joined the EA program?
PROBE: Were you feeling depressed, sad or lonely? What was making you feel this way? Did you have problems with relationships?

5. Why did you join the EA program?
PROBE: What did you want the EA program to do for you or help you with? What did you hope to get from the EA program?

6. Has Employment Action helped you to make any goal or goals for yourself?
If so, what are your employment goals? Why did you choose this goal?
If not, will you go through the Employment Action program without any goals?

7. So far, has the Employment Action program helped you to get training for a job or to upgrade your skills?
If so, how? What kind of training or upgrading have you received? Where did you get the training or upgrading? Is the training or upgrading helpful to you? In what ways?
If not, why?

8. So far, has Employment Action helped you to get unpaid job placements?
If so, how many placements did you have, and for how long? Where did you do your placement?

If not, why?

9. So far, has Employment Action helped you to get paid employment?
If so, how? What kinds of jobs did you get? How long did you work? Did your job(s) give you the type of experience that you wanted? How did you pay for your medication when you were working?
If not, why?
10. Are you on a benefits program now (i.e., ODSP, CPP, OW, LTD, EI)?
Which one? How long? Have you received any help from the program to find work or get training?
11. Has the EA program help you in any other way?
PROBE: How about your health? What about your income and drug benefits?
12. What is your age?
- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 20 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 30-39 years old |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20-24 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 40-49 years old |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25-29 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 50 years or older |
13. What are your sources of income?
14. What is your personal monthly income?
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$0-\$500 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$1,001-\$1,500 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$501-\$1,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> more than \$1,500 |
15. Do you have a spouse or partner? Do you have children that you support?
16. Gender:
17. Were you born or raised in Canada, or did you immigrate to Canada as an adult?
If immigrated as an adult, how long have you lived in Canada? What is your status in Canada (e.g., citizen, permanent resident, refugee claimant, convention refugee, visitor, etc.)
18. Describe your education.
How would you describe your ability to communicate in English (reading, writing, speaking)?

Appendix 3b

Confidential interviews with former EA participants

1. How long were you in the EA program?
PROBE: start date and end date

2. Were you working at the time you joined the EA program?
*PROBE: **If not working:** Were there any reasons why you were not working? Did you have any income? What was your source of income?*

*PROBE: **If working:** What type of work were you doing? Did you want to be doing some other type of work? Why? What type of work?*

3. What type of employment experiences did you have in the years before you joined EA?
PROBE: How many different types of jobs have you had? In Canada and outside of Canada?
What is the best job that you've ever had? When? Why do you think that job was the best? Why are you no longer doing that job? What is the highest amount of income that you ever received from a job? When?

4. How was your health at the time when you joined the EA program?
PROBE: Were you feeling depressed, sad or lonely? What was making you feel this way? Did you have problems with relationships?

5. Why did you join the EA program?
PROBE: What did you want the EA program to do for you or help you with? What did you hope to get from the EA program?

6. Did Employment Action help you to make any goal or goals for yourself?
If so, what was your employment goal? Why did you choose this goal?
If not, did you go through the Employment Action program without any goals?

7. Did the Employment Action program help you to get training for a job or to upgrade your skills?
If so, how helpful? Exactly how did Employment Action help you? What kind of training or upgrading did you get? Where did you get the training or upgrading? Was your training or upgrading helpful to you? In what ways?
If not, why?

8. Did Employment Action help you to get unpaid job placements?
If so, how helpful? Exactly how did Employment Action help you? How many placements did you have, and for how long? Where did you do your placement?
If not, why?

9. Did Employment Action help you to get paid employment?

If so, how helpful? Exactly how did Employment Action help you? What kinds of jobs did you get? How long did you work? Did your job(s) give you the type of experience that you wanted? How did you pay for medications when you were working?

If not, why?

*PROBE: In the first **3 months** after you left EA, what was your experience with looking for work or finding a job? Did you find a job before or after you left Employment Action? If “Yes”, what kind of job? How long did you work at this job? Was it the kind of work that you hoped to be doing? Did you take any courses to improve your chances of finding good work?*

*PROBE: What is your employment situation **now**?*

Are you working? If “No”, are you looking for work? Are there any reasons why you are not working (or looking for work)?

If “Yes”, what type of work are you doing? How long have you been working? How did you find your job? Are you receiving Employer benefits (e.g., health, dental, etc.)?

Do you want to find a different job? What kind of job? Why?

Are you taking any courses to increase your chances of finding good work?

10. Did the EA program help you in any other way?

PROBE: What about your drug benefits?

*PROBE: In the first **3 months** after leaving the EA program, how was your health? Were you feeling depressed, sad or lonely? Why? Or were you feeling good about yourself? Why?*

*PROBE: How is your health **now**? Are you feeling depressed, sad or lonely? Why? Or are you feeling good about yourself? Why?*

11. Are you on a benefits program now (e.g., ODSP, CPP, OW, LTD)?

If “YES”: Which one? How long? Has your benefits program been helping you to find work or get training? How?

12. Why did you leave the Employment Action program?

13. What is your age?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 20 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 30-39 years old |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20-24 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 40-49 years old |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25-29 years old | <input type="checkbox"/> 50 years or older |

14. What are your sources of income?

15. What is your personal monthly income?

- \$0-\$500 \$1,001-\$1,500
 \$501-\$1,000 more than \$1,500

16. Do you have a spouse or partner? Do you have children that you support?

17. Are you now better off financially than when you joined Employment Action?

18. Gender:

19. Were you born or raised in Canada, or did you immigrate to Canada as an adult?
If immigrated as an adult, how long have you lived in Canada? What is your status in
Canada (e.g., citizen, permanent resident, refugee claimant, convention refugee,
visitor, etc.)

20. Describe your education.
How would you describe your ability to communicate in English (reading, writing,
speaking)?

Glossary of Government Benefit Programs

Canada Pension Plan (CPP Disability)

CPP is a program of the federal government that pays a monthly income benefit to disabled Canadians who have contributed to the plan for a specified number of years. Both physical and mental disabilities are covered by CPP. The disability must be a long-term condition that prevents recipients from being able to work on a regular basis.

Employment Insurance (EI)

Unemployed Canadians can receive EI benefits for limited periods of time if they contributed to EI for a specified number of weeks while they were working. Individuals who become unemployed through no fault of their own, who are ill, or who are caring for a newborn child may qualify for EI. The amount of income that individuals receive from EI is a function of their level of earnings prior to making a claim for benefits.

Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP)

ODSP is a program of the Government of Ontario (Ministry of Community and Social Services). The program provides financial assistance to disabled people who have low incomes. Disabilities could be physical or mental, but must be “substantial”, relatively enduring, and restrict some activities of daily living. Individuals generally receive an income benefit from ODSP according to the composition of their dependent household, although the income can be adjusted for other specific reasons. There are two streams of ODSP. Income support provides recipients with a monthly income, and employment supports provides income plus opportunities for training and other support for returning to work.

Ontario Works (OW)

Ontario Works (OW) is a program of the Government of Ontario (Ministry of Community, Family and Children’s Services) that replaced the program formerly known as Welfare in 1996. OW is an income source of last resort that provides financial and other assistance (e.g., employment placements and job skills training) to people in “temporary” financial need. The amount of monthly income that an individual receives depends on the composition of her/his dependent household (e.g., 2 adults and 2 children aged 13 or older), and the amount that he/she spends on shelter. Individuals may also qualify for certain additional benefits to facilitate their participation in various OW programs.