



Pan-Canadian Community Development Learning Network Profile of Effective Practice

Greater Trail Community Skills Centre

Context

The Greater Trail Community Skills Centre is located in Trail BC. Trail is on the Columbia River in the West Kootenay region, 18 kilometres driving distance from the Canada-USA border. Trail's social and cultural history has been shaped by the Italian immigrants, the first of whom came to Canada to build the railways in the 1900's and others who have come directly to work at the smelter.

Trail is the financial and service centre for the region and home to Teck Cominco Ltd.'s Lead-Zinc Smelter complex, the largest one of its kind in the world. The mining and smelter operations, although downsized over the years, are still the primary economic driver for the area. Like many other B.C. communities, Trail has had the experience of dependency on a single resource sector industry. The adjustment has been significant as the number of well-paid employees at the smelter has shrunk from 4,500 to 1,600 over 25 years.

This Profile of Effective Practice is one of fifteen stories examining how innovative, community-based initiatives are using comprehensive approaches to improve social and economic conditions on a local level.

The profiles were prepared as part of a 2.5-year project of the Canadian CED Network looking at the links between social inclusion and community economic development.

For other profiles, more information on the project and additional resources on social inclusion and CED, see the notes at the end of this document.

The Skills Centre serves primarily the Greater Trail area, which consists of 5 municipalities and 2 electoral districts with a current population of 20,000. It employs 25 full-time and part-time employees and contractors, providing services to thousands of local residents. As the Board's Past president, Wake Williams states, "The high pace of change and restructuring in our society continues and the effects of that are being strongly experienced here in the more rural areas of B.C. The Skills Centre continues to play a very important role in providing support to those affected by change in assisting them through transition in their working lives."

Trail, BC

History – Trail was incorporated in 1895 when a small smelter operation opened to service the Rossland mines.

Economy – Largely a single-industry, resource-based economy, home to the largest lead-zinc smelter complex of its kind in the world. The smelter workforce however has shrunk from 4,500 to 1,600 high-paying jobs over 25 years.

Social Need – There has been a rapid demographic shift as birthrates decline and many youth leave the community. Low cost housing in Trail has resulted in an in-migration of individuals and families dependent on the social safety net. In two years, the number of public schools decreased from 25 to 11. In nearby Rossland, major recreation developments are underway, resulting in a building boom and increased numbers of wealthy absentee condominium owners. A major workforce renewal is anticipated in the coming 3-5 years as smelter workers and others in the community retire.

Claim to Fame – The region has a rich sporting history and is very proud of the legendary Trail Smoke Eaters, the amateur hockey team as well as a number of Olympic medal winners in skiing.

History

The Greater Trail Community Skills Centre was established in 1997 as a part of the **Strategic Initiative**, in which twenty Community Skills Centres were created, funded jointly by the federal government and the government of British Columbia (through the *Skills Now* initiative of the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training).

The Community Skills Centres (CSCs) are located across the province, generally in smaller communities which were facing considerable economic stress due to rapid changes in the local economy. These changes often arose from the reduction or closure of major employment sectors (forestry, fishing, agricultural base, etc.). The CSCs were designed to provide local education and job training through community-based courses that both met local needs for workforce training and skills updating, and demonstrated the innovative use of information technology. Each CSC could develop its own distinctive approach to meeting local needs, but all were expected to provide: training skills that were in current demand for the local workforce without duplicating existing training programs; referrals to other community resources for additional support; and more direct control for communities in designing and delivering skills training programs.

The Community Skills Centres program funding formula included 100 percent of operating costs in year one, 80% in year two, 60% year three and so on until fully self-supporting by the beginning of year six. Also provided was \$250,000 in leasehold improvements and \$250,000 for equipment, primarily computers and labs.

In response to the Strategic Initiative opportunity, a proposal was submitted by a community coalition in 1996. Trail was awarded the last of the 20 Community Skills Centres funding agreement and the non-profit society was incorporated in 1997. The first board was drawn from the development committee and Jan Morton became Executive Director, on secondment from her role as Director of Community Education (a collaborative venture involving the School District and Selkirk College). The challenge for the Skills Centre was to find a way to be entrepreneurial, without competing with existing services. In 1997, they were contracted by the then HRDC to deliver the Targeted Wage Subsidy Program in Greater Trail. In 1998 the local HRDC downsized, contracting out its employment services. The Skills Centre became the employment services hub (working with the college and another community agency) but the issue of competition in the delivery of training services continued to cause tension with other education and training providers.

The Skills Centre recognized a need to provide customized training that was responsive to employers' needs. In the mid 90's, many of the laid-off smelter workers found employment with the one hundred new or expanded industrial suppliers, created by Teck Cominco's outsourcing

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activities. These small businesses and the other major employers in the region, including the regional hospital, tourism resorts and power and lumber companies had unmet training needs.

Following considerable discussion, in the fall of 1998 a partnership agreement was negotiated between the School District, Selkirk College and the Skills Centre. It was a unique, win-win agreement in which the delivery of adult education services in the community was completely restructured. The three providers signed a memorandum of understanding in which the School District retained its role providing adult secondary completion but gave up non-credit continuing education. The College also retained its role delivering adult basic education and assumed full responsibility for non-credit continuing education. In turn, the College contracted the Skills Centre to deliver the community and corporate training on its behalf, receiving in exchange an administration fee and splitting the net revenue from the training provided. The Skills Centre provided \$200,000 to the College to set up a state of the art two-year diploma multi-media program. This program trained a number of individuals in skills that have lead to a cluster of new media ventures in the area. Although the agreements have been renewed to reflect emerging conditions, the overall working relationship continues to this day.

At the same time, two local school districts were being forced into amalgamation and needed new office space. The newly amalgamated school district struck an agreement with the local power company to use the undeveloped ground floor of its administrative offices. The Skills Centre contributed \$250,000 for leasehold improvement costs, in exchange for 15 years in which it would pay only the operating costs for prime office space. The Skills Centre in Trail had the benefit of learning from the experiences of other skills centres to keep overhead costs low, avoiding investment in costly classroom space and computer equipment. They focused on forging successful partnerships that built on the strengths and assets of local organizations, in order to benefit community members.

Activities

The Skills Centre has four main operational streams: Entrepreneurial Solutions, Employment Solutions, Training Solutions, and Community Solutions. Each activity and its outcomes are summarized below.

Greater Trail Community Skills Centre

Year Incorporated – 1997

Vision – An inclusive and healthy community that balances social and economic development.

Mission – To be a community leader in social economic development and learning

Values

- actively support each individual in working towards achieving their full potential;
- strive for equity of access to opportunities for learning and skills development;
- serve the diverse needs of the community with respect, integrity and fairness; and
- provide leadership to facilitate mutually beneficial results with our clients and partners.

Activities – Four operational streams: Employment Solutions, Training Solutions, Entrepreneurial Solutions and Community Solutions.

Impact – Employs 25 full-time and part-time employees and contractors and provides services to thousands of local residents

Strategic Priorities 2005-2008

- Assess and adjust employment services to respond to changing client needs, labour market and government services.
- Increase the Skills Centre's capacity to address the emerging skills gap by focusing on solutions for the skills gap in the trades and expanding our expertise to other sectors of the labour force.
- Promote the value and recognize the opportunities of social economic development.
- Expand and strengthen the delivery of training and education opportunities in the Greater Trail area.

1. Entrepreneurial Solutions

The Right Stuff – The Right Stuff is a social enterprise providing employment and training opportunities for youth as well as new revenue for the organization. The Skills Centre has been contracted by the newspaper to collate and distribute the daily paper. In turn, the Skills Centre has been able to hire at-risk youth, a number of whom have “fallen between the cracks” of provincial and federal employment programs.

Over the past three years, 16 employees have participated in the venture with a 70% success rate. Success is defined as going to back to school or finding long-term employment. The venture now generates an annual surplus of \$16,000 (over and above all administrative costs), a sum which is invested back into the organization to fill funding gaps. A quick calculation demonstrates the value of the venture: the first eight employees had been receiving \$50,000 per annum in provincial benefits, but over the first year of employment, those 8 were earning \$60,000 per year in combined income, while acquiring a considerable amount of training and employment skills development and “the incredible dignity that comes from earning their own money.”

Kootenay Centre for Social Enterprise – Currently under development, the Kootenay Centre for Social Enterprise is planned to become a leader in the advancement of the social enterprise movement within the Kootenay region.

2. Employment Solutions

The Skills Centre has contracts with Service Canada to deliver Employment Assistance Services which include career and job search counselling, support to access Negotiated Training Supports and a unique Trades and Technology Centre which services the entire West Kootenay/Boundary region. It also holds the contract to deliver the Targeted Wage Subsidy program for the majority of the West Kootenays.

Employment Program Outcomes: 950 people served
(except for the Targeted Wage program)

	2002	2003
Number of files closed	553	505
Employed	45%	51%
Self-employed	3%	3%
Self-sufficient	44%	33%
Non-self-sufficient	4%	9%
Returned to school (excl. NTS clients)	4%	4%

3. Training Solutions

The Skills Centre, in collaboration with Selkirk College, offers a wide variety of community and corporate training courses, including computer applications, first aid and safety training, business and organizational development, health services and general interest programming. Outcomes: In 2004, net training revenue from community and corporate training services was \$80,000, which was split with the college.

Community and Corporate Training
(in collaboration with Selkirk College)

Fiscal Year	Total Courses Delivered	Contract Courses	Student Contact Hours
2000-2001	211	41	31,600
2001-2002	215	62	52,706
2002-2003	166	51	24,038
2003-2004	177	74	27,447
2004-2005	130	100	20,047

For the past three years, the Skills Centre has also been contracted by Teck Cominco (Trail Operations) to manage its on-site learning centre for employees.

Bridging the Divides – This project was a three-year action research project funded by the Office of Learning Technologies that focused on two rural BC regions. Ending in March, 2006, it

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was designed to build local capacity and unleash the full potential of communities to transform their own social and economic conditions by investing in lifelong learning, information technologies and innovative community economic development. The project did this by supporting local collaborative efforts at addressing inter-related learning, economic and digital divides facing rural and resource-based communities.



An excellent immediate outcome of the Bridging the Divides (BTD) project was the leveraging of funds. In the first year of the project, BTD contributed \$30,000 that leveraged (conservative calculations) \$75,000 in in-kind contributions and \$100,000 in cash toward a variety of learning projects. In Year 2, BTD contributed \$56,000 that leveraged \$125,000 in in-kind contributions and \$96,000 in cash.

The goals of the BTD were the development of CED strategies to diversify local economies, enhanced community use of ICT to support innovation and entrepreneurship, and increased citizen participation in learning, skills development, CED and distance education. Although the project has come to a close it has left a number of key legacies that will benefit the region for years to come.

4. Community Solutions

Staff and board members of the Skills Centre actively participate in a variety of community committees and community planning processes. One of many examples is the annual Rivers' Day celebration, which the staff organize as a volunteer contribution to the community. The goal is to increase awareness of the largely ignored asset running through the middle of town in the form of the Columbia River.

Participatory and Comprehensive Analysis

The Skills Centre staff are determined to run an excellent business operation that demonstrates strong social returns. The social mandate is rooted in shared values. Among the staff team there are many perspectives and approaches to development, with the commonality that all care about the community becoming a better place for all and for future generations.

"The organization has a belief that every person benefits from opportunities in learning and development, we all get better if we all are learning and developing. And that goes right from the CEO of large corporations to unemployed people," stated Jan. The underlying principle of acknowledging the dignity and worth of each individual, regardless of their financial circumstances, is clear. The principle stated is that "everyone has a right to participate in our society, that is our fundamental social value."

"We are continually balancing social outcomes, financial returns and human resource capacity. We run a good business operation at the same time our hearts are drawn to the social mandate."

Jan Morton

Having recently undertaken a strategic planning process, the Skills Centre board and staff revisited the organization's mission and vision. "Our mission is 'We are a community leader in social economic development and learning,'" Jan explains. "That is our niche and people are really proud to be there." The organizational culture gives permission to staff to have strong

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business beliefs along with deep social values. They work hard to combine those values and do so with pride. “By combining rather than separating the business and social into separate realms, we remove the negative judgments and are able to explore innovative blends of the business and social development models,” adds Jan.

The Skills Centre recognizes there are many barriers to employment for people in the community, including lack of training and experience. With funds contributed by a local labour union, the Skills Centre established a micro-loan fund which allows individuals who lack the resources to get a pair of steel-toed boots or other work tools so they can get onto a jobsite. For some individuals, practical short-term support may be all that’s needed, and for others the barriers are a great deal more complex and deeply rooted. The Skills Centre seeks to offer a range of supports and opportunities for training and learning.

In describing their comprehensive analysis, Jan describes how the core function of the Skills Centre is to serve the community, with a belief that it is a complex and dynamic system that involves public, private and community sectors, with richness created by the intersection of the sectors.

Initially, the Skills Centre had adopted a mission statement that focused on the facilitation of skills training, reflecting the mandate of the original funding envelope. Through the strategic planning process undertaken last year, the Skills Centre recognized the degree to which the community at large did not understand its role as a facilitator of training. Through engagement in a variety of CED networks, including the Canadian CED Network, they were able to recognize the role they play in social economic development and that they are “a damn good community economic development organization.”

By blending social and economic development, the Skills Centre recognizes it is doing leading edge work and so needs to create places of discussion to enhance their process of continuous learning and improvement. In the early days of the Right Stuff social enterprise, there was friction amongst the staff in relation to various business and human resource decisions made. The organization has a contract to deliver the paper on time every day and to honour that contract while providing training supports and work experience for at risk youth. Compromises had to be made leading to values-based tension amongst the staff, including the administrative team. Initially, the administrative team worked out their differences and then dedicated a considerable amount of time to meet with staff individually and in groups to hear their concerns and explain the role this emerging social enterprise could play. “If we are the leaders we believe ourselves to be, we needed to grapple with challenges honestly and openly.” Creating open dialogue helped the learning to continue, moving past the tension. The staff team is much stronger now having gone through that process.

Outcomes and Evaluation

The Skills Centre is recognized as a credible part of the community, playing an important role and creating value in a way that is different from other organizations. But true outcome data is challenging to provide because most funding agencies are preoccupied with tallying outputs, draining the organization of the human and financial resources to truly measure outcomes. There is a great deal of output data available but for the most part, outcomes are assessed intuitively and anecdotally.



Skills Centre staff photo at the 2005 Annual Rivers' Day celebrations in Trail

Success stories are regularly shared amongst staff to ensure the focus is kept on the difference the organization makes for people. A few examples are below.

1. An employee at a large corporation was pushed into a middle-management position and was paralyzed with fear because she didn't think she could manage all the responsibility on top of caring for her severely disabled child. Skills Centre staff helped to develop a customized training program, that allowed the employee to study between 8 and 10 at night, the only time slot possible for her. This support and the employee's commitment to training allowed her to move past the fear and flourish in the position.
2. One client was originally sponsored through an aboriginal organization to take the Nursing Unit Clerk program at the college, but being a home-study program and the client being a mature student, she required more time. An extension was granted but she was still unable to complete the program and original funding agency was unable to grant another extension. Since client fell into HRDC's "Reachback" status, the Skills Centre was able to work out a plan where her progress was very carefully monitored. Following the plan and with close support, she successfully finished the program and was able to complete her practicum with the assistance of family. She is now a casual at the hospital, and is getting enough hours that she no longer needs income assistance. Her situation was more challenging than most and it is to the credit of the local HRDC office that the Skills Centre was able to develop a client-centred plan that supported this woman to be successful.
3. One counsellor recounts: "Okay this has to be the one person in my career that I will never forget. "W" was one of our first Job Club Youth. When he came into the program his head was hung low, he was completely missing the hair on one side of his head and the other was covered with beautiful thick, long, hair (as a toddler he had pulled hot oil down on himself & been severely burned down the one side of his face). He could not

make eye contact and as you can imagine, he was the target of abuse from local kids. He had also grown up in a second or third generation welfare family. You may remember seeing him walking around town with his walkman on, his head hung low and a ball cap pulled down to cover most of his face. One of our outings for job club was to take the group up to the 44th Field Squadron and introduce them to opportunities in the army. Well “W” never looked back. Some time back he came in to see us and with him he brought his 5-month old son, Justin, and his wife to be. They were getting married the next day. “W” tells us that he is now in the Regimental Force, living in Ontario and making tons of money. He now has his hair cut short, no ball cap and he walks a foot taller. I didn't realize how tall he actually was. Looking very handsome indeed. A truly remarkable young man that worked very hard to overcome some major obstacles."

Success Factors and Lessons Learned

A key success factor is the openness of communication between staff and board, and the openness to change. This organization really is a learning organization. There is a deep commitment to building relationships within the community, with other organizations and businesses and to planning with attention to the future. By demonstrating their respect for different values, they are able to participate in open dialogue with regards to balancing social and business outcomes.

Success Factors

- Form strong community partnerships by finding win-win arrangements and taking the 'high road' in negotiations
- Open communication between staff and board, fostering a learning climate in the organization.
- A committed board, focused on policy and strategic thinking

The desire to seek win-win arrangements and not engage in win-lose struggles has been key to their success in forging strong partnerships with many players in the community. Overcoming the initial resentment of existing delivery agents in the community was done slowly and respectfully, as they negotiated the realignment of service delivery. There has been a commitment to take the “high road”.

Another success factor is a board committed to the process of board development and strategic planning. Committed to using the Carver model of policy governance, the board focuses its role on policy and strategic thinking, while

welcoming input from its staff. The Skills Centre has developed a strong set of policies constructed under this model. “A strong board has been an important element of what we've become,” Jan emphasizes.

Lessons Learned

- The optimal end result doesn't always look like what you thought it would when you started out – this process demands trust and flexibility.
- Developing a strong organization means always being aware of the next step, while being attentive to the present.
- Allow surprising ideas, encourage risk-taking and accept that mistakes can be made, innovate and experiment, think five years ahead, recognize changing demographics.
- Now that they understand themselves better as an organization, the next important step for the Skills Centre is a branding initiative and communicating in the community.
- Storytelling is a powerful means of communicating and learning. One Skills Centre board member whose expertise is knowledge management commented that, “...it all comes down to our ability to tell stories as we are a storytelling culture. We intentionally share

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success stories amongst the staff and occasionally with our Board and funding agencies, to keep ourselves focused on why work so hard and put up with so much in the way of politics and bureaucracy.”

Policy Lessons

Government-funded programs are inhibiting as they are increasingly imposing a template of services that prevents the Skills Centre from finding local solutions. Jan Morton and staff would love to get the same amount of money and be able to design programs that truly meet the community's needs.

In most government contracts, there is a lack of understanding about what it takes to have an effective organization, the reality of what it costs to have strong staff, board and ED. It is not the fault of the individuals with whom the Skills Centre negotiates contracts; it is the relentless push for bureaucratic accountability that overshadows the genuine impact on people and communities.

One very enabling program was Bridging the Divides, because it allowed the Skills Centre to act on what the community needs, and was focused on outcomes. Another is the social enterprise because so long as the Skills Centre meets the contractual requirements of the customer, they are free to organize the work to reflect their social mission and financial requirements.

Ellie Parks

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More information on the Greater Trail Community Skills Centre can be found on their website at: <http://www.communityskillscentre.com/>

Sources

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Bridging the Divides website: <http://www.bridgingthedivides.ca/>

More Profiles of Effective Practice and other resources on social inclusion are available at: <http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/learningnetwork.asp>

This project is funded by the Community Development and Partnerships Directorate of Social Development Canada. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of Social Development Canada.

Published by:

© 2005 The Canadian CED Network
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