npower canada
LAUNCHING TECH CAREERS.
TRANSFORMING LIVES.

The NPower Canada Model
A Holistic Approach for Youth success

INTRODUCTION

There is a need to develop creative solutions that provide opportunities for youth to enter the workforce, and to receive education and training to prepare them for the future of work. However, technical training on its own isn't enough to ensure the long-term success of opportunity youth entering tech careers.

NPower Canada employs a comprehensive and holistic model, augmenting the technical training and certifications with professional development, life skills, leadership training and wraparound supports to ensure that program participants are equipped to succeed long-term. The overall purpose of the NPower Canada program is to ensure that individual participants exceed requirements that will enable them to not only earn in-demand certifications and opportunities for employment, but to sustain themselves long-term in a meaningful digital career.

In this paper, we will take a closer look at how NPower Canada's holistic education model has played a vital role in setting a framework for developing future leaders within the IT industry. We will also provide an initial framework with guided questions to support other workforce development practitioners in developing and refining their own models for supporting opportunity youth.

ABOUT NPOWER CANADA

NPower Canada is a charitable organization that launches underserved young adults into meaningful and sustainable careers in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) field. NPower Canada's programs provide participants with no-cost in-demand technical and professional skills training and connects them to new and rewarding career opportunities with some of Canada's largest employers.

NPower Canada addresses two major problems:

1. There are more than 860,000 youth across Canada between the ages of 15 and 29 who are not working, studying or participating in some form of training.
   Source: CivicAction*, Now Hiring Report, 2018*

2. Despite an additional 61,000+ tech workers last year Canadian companies posted job openings for 116,000 tech positions.
   Source: Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) *Cyberprovinces, 2019*

NPower Canada bridges the gap between non-traditional and diverse job seekers and employers hiring ICT talent.

Since its inception in late 2014, NPower Canada has launched more than 80% of its graduates into sustainable employment and/or higher education through its unique and innovative workforce development model. NPower Canada has gained acclaim as an evidence-based,

best-in-class youth employment solution, demonstrating its scalability by growing from serving 87 youth in 2015 to 590 youth in 2019.

NPower Canada achieves social impact by helping youth facing barriers to employment including 91% served to date from racialized backgrounds, 38% in receipt of income support, 25% living in public or emergency housing and 45% New Canadians.

Upon enrollment, NPower Canada participants have average households of 3.6 members and an average before-tax annual *household income* of $32,897. Six months later, when graduating from the NPower Canada program, employed alumni earn an average starting salary of $39,645. This additional income can more than double their prior household income, helping to lift them and their families out of poverty.

NPower Canada launched its first program cohort in Calgary in May 2019 with its first class of 32 youth who graduated in August 2019. Within 5 months of graduation, 78% of graduates have secured employment with the program on track to achieve or exceed the 80% target before the 6-month mark. Also, the second class and final cohort of 2019 graduated 32 youth in December, and in 2020, NPower Canada will deliver year-round programming in Calgary with three consecutive cohorts enrolling 50 youth each, totaling 150 opportunity youth equipped for tech careers.

Program Participant Profiles

Below we explore 3 alumni profiles that represent some of the diversity of NPower Canada graduates who have overcome significant barriers to employment and successfully launched tech careers within 6 months of graduating. All names and identifying details presented below have been changed or removed to protect the privacy of individuals and respective companies.

Meet Fariah:
Fariah is a 28-year-old refugee claimant that arrived to Canada only 6 months prior to attending the NPower Canada program. She was referred to the program by her caseworker and encouraged to apply as she recently obtained her work permit and was eager to start gaining Canadian experience. Fariah had studied and obtained a higher education degree within her home country 4 years prior to coming to Canada. Her degree was unrelated to IT and she was unable to leverage her credentials to find meaningful work upon arriving in Canada. Instead, Fariah found herself trapped in low-wage survival jobs while struggling to make ends meet. Fariah was ready for a change and eagerly applied to the NPower Canada program with the aim of gaining relevant skills that would lead to long-term success. Soon after earning her certifications through the program, NPower Canada placed Fariah into a full-time role as a Team Lead and Technical Support Representative for a globally recognized IT company providing leading digital and business services to diverse customers.

Meet Kiyan:
Kiyan is a 22-year-old high school graduate and first-generation Canadian citizen. Kiyan heard about the program through a few of his friends that had also graduated from the program and successfully obtained IT employment. Though Kiyan always had an interest in IT, his responsibility to take care of his parents and younger siblings had taken precedence over his own career aspirations. Since it had not been possible for Kiyan to balance full-time education with his family responsibilities, Kiyan was excited to pursue the NPower Canada program as a no-cost, accessible, part-time program that could accelerate his entry into an IT career. Kiyan worked hard in the program and stayed after class helping others, earning admiration from his peers as a leader. Upon successfully completing his certifications, NPower Canada placed Kiyan with a Fortune 500 IT consulting firm as a full-time IT Analyst.

Meet Rose:
Rose is a 20-year-old Canadian citizen. Rose attempted university but withdrew from her partial studies due to rising tuition while coping with mental health challenges. Before learning of the program through a newspaper article in the Calgary Herald, Rose had been unemployed and looking for jobs that she could maintain while attending to her health issues. With the life skills coaching and wraparound supports from NPower Canada staff, Rose's confidence grew throughout the program and she earned her technical certifications while having no prior experience with technology. Shortly after graduation, Rose was hired in a full-time permanent role by a technology services and solutions company as an IT Support and Systems Consultant.

These three profiles are representative of the diverse types of opportunity youth whom NPower Canada has upskilled and launched into tech careers. To date, more than 1,200 opportunity youth have graduated from the program.

As can be seen from the profiles, the youth that NPower Canada serves come from non-traditional academic and career backgrounds, often lacking advanced education and having little to no work history. Therefore, NPower Canada also focuses on marketing these youth to employers from a strengths-based perspective by cultivating and highlighting their technical and soft skills, along with promoting the benefits of recruiting a diverse and inclusive workforce.

THE NPOWER CANADA MODEL

Unlike most employment programs that deliver isolated interventions, such as career exploration or job search workshops, NPower Canada provides opportunity youth with a full spectrum of support from career assessment to skills training to job placement and post-hire services. The NPower Canada program team includes staff members with human services backgrounds to provide wraparound supports to participants including mental health counselling, life skills coaching and warm referrals to other vital services.

This comprehensive and holistic model, coupled with NPower Canada's sector-based approach to workforce development, contributes significantly to the program's success in helping youth to secure and retain employment. NPower Canada also relies on strong cross-sectoral partners for the successful delivery of its workforce development program. Community partners such as local employment sector providers, women's centres, settlement services, ethnocultural associations, organizations serving persons with disabilities and other allied agencies play a vital role in helping NPower Canada recruit opportunity youth.

NPower Canada also develops robust partnerships with leading employers of IT talent who recruit its graduates for junior-level roles with strong career prospects. NPower Canada involves employers at every stage of its program design and delivery from developing curriculum and assessment tools to co-delivering training to job placement and post-hire mentorship. Working with the Board or Directors and Industry Council to identify potential employers, NPower Canada has grown its network of employer partners from an initial group of 8 firms in August 2014 to more than 200 companies as of January 2020. Among these employers, 15 firms have each hired more than 20 NPower Canada graduates and 9 have hired more than 40 graduates.

Figure 1 below is the NPower Canada model that is used to inform recruitment, curriculum, program delivery, participant support, and employment outcomes in relation to the vision and mission of the organization.
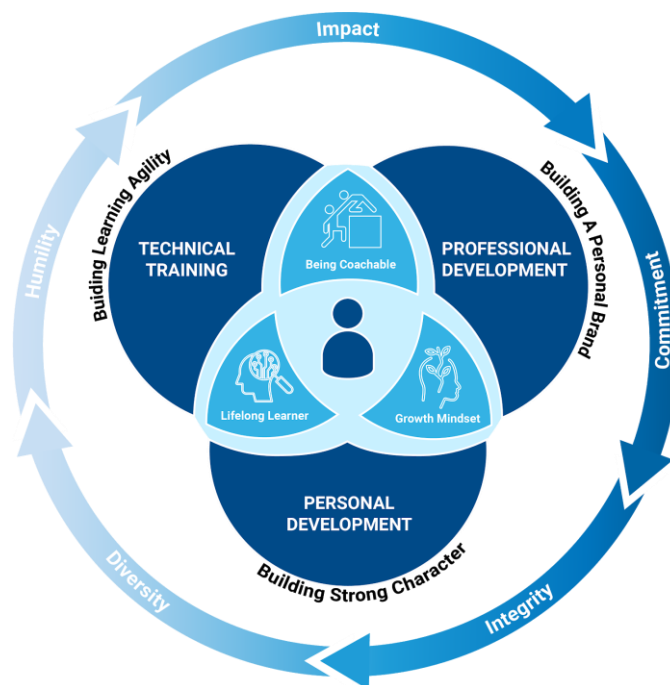

Figure 1: NPower Canada Model

The Core of the Model

To best understand the model, it is important to begin at the very centre and then work our way outwards. At the core of the model, we see the participant. Unlike other programs that offer a "light touch" approach, such as directing opportunity youth to employment resource centres with job posting boards and self-directed job search tools, the NPower Canada program provides a "high touch" spectrum of holistic and comprehensive services, including direct placement into meaningful employment.

To ensure the success of an individual, each and every staff member within the organization must begin with understanding the person we are committed to serve. It is also important to consider the youth at the core of the model because these are the individuals who are primarily responsible for navigating a digital economy with the support of NPower Canada staff. From the time before a participant has applied to the program, and after the point at which they are hired and progress in their careers, our focus at all stages of the program is to develop an

understanding of their social, emotional, learning, and employment needs. To accomplish this, there are three main areas that NPower Canada staff works on achieving including:

- Build trusting relationships: NPower Canada staff work to really get to know our participants while creating a safe environment. By setting clear expectations and maintaining open communication with consistent feedback, staff build participants' confidence in their ability to gain marketable skills and secure meaningful employment.

- Raising accountability: NPower Canada adopts a strengths-based approach, setting high standards for excellence in all stages of the program and holding youth accountable for their success. Participants sign off on a code of conduct that sets clear expectations for their behavior and performance and have regular touchpoints with staff.

- Building confidence: supporting our participants in strengthening their belief in their own limitless potential to succeed. Constructive guidance and feedback, opportunities to stretch and lead, as well as recognition for new skills and growth, all help to build participant confidence.

These points are the essential ingredients for a recipe that makes up the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors for opportunity youth to achieve their career goals.

Learning Domains and Core Objectives

The three learning domains, represented in navy blue that surround the core of the model, including technical, professional development and personal development training. Each learning domain contains within it a core objective that we focus on when developing curriculum to engage youth and relaying program elements to external stakeholders. These objectives include:

- Building learning agility - our focus is supporting individuals in learning how to learn and the metacognitive process. Many of our employer partners praise our alumni for possessing an affinity for learning on the job, and as a result, the program has been able to achieve strong job retention outcomes with more than 80% of alumni remaining employed at 12, 24 and 36 months post-programs.

- Building a personal brand - allows participants to showcase their talents to a greater community and thereby increases potential for employment. NPower Canada believes we have in our hands the future leaders of the digital gig economy and thus, the professional development workshops are key to increasing the visibility of our candidates to prospective employers.

- Building strong character - provides practical strategies to the participants in facing challenges in both life and in the workplace head on. The personal development curriculum and workshops are geared to developing the life skills needed for individuals to succeed not only in jobs but for their own well-being. Many of our alumni share that these lessons have supported them in navigating the grey areas that often reside between hard and soft skills.

Whether an individual enters the program with some previous or no technical knowledge, the intent of the model is to steer away from solely an IT-related content focus. The inclusion of both

professional as well as personal skills development ensures that the focus of the program is to develop a well-rounded candidate who is being put forth for varying opportunities within the IT landscape.

Key Employability Skills

The following employability skills have been identified by employer partners as transferable skills necessary for individuals to succeed in junior IT roles. While digital roles are NPower Canada's focus, these skills are universal and support the success of anyone participating in workforce development initiatives, regardless of the sector. Though not explicitly stated within the model, these skills are integrated within the core objectives explained above. Thus, the following objectives each contain 3 key employability skills for a total of 9 attributes that are measured and assessed for each of the participants throughout the duration of the program and at all stages.

It is important to note that the key employability skills are not only measurable but also teachable through coaching and feedback we provide to youth throughout the program in preparation for the workplace. Each employability skill is categorized under a specific core objective including:

- Building Learning Agility is aligned with Technical Training and is defined by:
    - Problem Solving
    - Teamwork & Collaboration
    - Working Independently

- Building a Personal Brand is aligned with Professional Development and focuses on:
    - Accountability
    - Communication
    - Reliability

- Building Strong Character is aligned with Personal Development and involves:
    - Self-Regulation
    - Self-Advocacy
    - Organization and Time Management

Lastly, though the core framework for the model does not change, as employers and industry partners indicate that there is a shift in the economy, and thereby a shift in skills needed to fill vacant entry-level roles, the technical skills can change and be updated based on employer demand. This helps to ensure that NPower Canada continues to be informed and prepared for the future of work and that the curriculum remains truly agile, incorporating insights directly from IT industry partners.

Core Competencies and Key Traits

In between the learning domains, there are 3 core competencies that can be considered key transitional areas of knowledge transfer represented as light blue on Figure 1. These areas act like a bridge that connects the participant at the core and the learning domains themselves. Similar to the learning domains, embedded within each core competency there are an additional 3 key traits we support in building within our participants which include:

- Being coachable: the ability to accept constructive guidance and implement external feedback.

- Having a growth mindset: the ability to take on challenges as motivation in efforts to increase learning and self-development.

- Becoming a lifelong learner: the ability to carry ongoing pursuit of learning in both personal and professional areas of growth beyond the program.

However, unlike key employability skills within learning domains, there are integrated key traits related to each of these transitional areas. These key traits include:

- A coachable individual who demonstrates commitment, openness, and a willingness to learn;

- An individual with a growth mindset showcases adaptability, resilience/grit, and initiative/passion toward bettering themselves;

- Lastly, a lifelong learner is someone who demonstrates creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking in the context of the program and more importantly as they launch and progress in their career.

Unlike key employability skills stated earlier, it must be noted that key traits are not always as easily measurable, but they are still teachable and observable in the context of the program. Participants are made aware of these traits and are provided with ample opportunities to exhibit their abilities in these varying areas of growth through consistent feedback and coaching.

Overarching Organizational Values

Lastly, the 5 values of NPower Canada that surround the inner workings of the model are what inspire and motivate our staff along with guiding the direction and culture of the organization. These 5 aspects are directly correlated to the organizational mission and vision as stated at the beginning of this paper which is to serve individuals regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background to succeed in the new digital economy. The values include:

- Impact – We work together to transform lives and strengthen communities

- Commitment – We are dedicated to the success of our participants, team and stakeholders

- Integrity – We are transparent, honest and ethical in all interactions

- Diversity – We are committed to efforts that build respect, dignity, fairness, equity and self-esteem

- Humility – We learn from mistakes and successes in equal measure

Keeping these values and all components of the model at the forefront of everything we do, supports our participants to achieve increased prosperity, sustainability, and independence.

Challenges and Next Steps

Though the model presented above has proven to be a framework that supports program participants to secure and sustain meaningful employment, there are also challenges that arise as NPower Canada continues to grow and scale nationally. Specifically, insights from industry have been based on employment needs of organizations based in Toronto and more recently in Calgary. Other regions will have distinct industry talent needs and labour market challenges, necessitating the continued adaptation of NPower Canada's program. Engaging with local employers to identify and address their needs and making the associated updates to our programs will ensure the continued relevance of our offerings in diverse markets.

NPower Canada's mission extends beyond serving opportunity youth to obtain employment in digital careers, to also supporting these youth with other life challenges that they face. Therefore, it is important that program and frontline staff be equipped to support and to collaborate with external community partners to ensure that youth's personal circumstances have a minimal impact on obtaining employment. Maintaining rapport with community and human services agencies and helping youth navigate these supports is an essential component of the program. Establishing those connections in new communities as NPower Canada grows will be key to the continued success of program participants.

NPower Canada has also identified assessment practices as an area for development as the program expands. How does the organization effectively assess an individual for social and emotional skills - grit, motivation, and sheer will to succeed - and then strengthen these throughout the program? The model that NPower Canada has implemented is the first stage in guiding participants but there is room for enhancement of assessment practices, not only internally but also within the IT sector, that goes beyond the scope of hard skills, and includes other skills such as professional and emotional intelligence.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Throughout the paper we have discussed the holistic nature of the NPower Canada model and its success in equipping and placing opportunity youth into meaningful and sustainable IT careers. Our intention for sharing our model with the broader workforce development community is for other practitioners to reflect on aspects of this model that may be applicable to their own work in supporting opportunity youth. Below are questions for reflection that can be adopted by community agencies that work with youth and employers, that are looking into new innovative methods for acquiring young diverse talent to meet the needs of their organizations.

- Question 1: How does your program support youth from a holistic perspective to overcome intersecting barriers to employment?

- Question 2: How might your program market opportunity youth to employers through a strengths-based approach?

- Question 3: What do you think that community agencies, educators and other workforce development practitioners can do to move the needle in better preparing youth for the future of work?

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