

Training Program Caught in Negotiations

A Study of Women in an HRDC Employment Program

by Ellen Case

L'auteure veut savoir pourquoi un cours de micro-informatique pour gens d'affaires établi par Développement des ressources humaines Canada pour la formation des sans-emplois, a été annulé en dépit de son haut taux de succès.

The project was comprised predominately of unemployed women.... While this training has given people new skills and achieved a commendable success rate in job placement, the last group of students completed their final class in October 1997.

Consider this: A program established to prepare unemployed people to re-enter the job market is so successful that 80 per cent of its graduates find employment, yet it has been discontinued. Why?

The Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) project called The Microcomputer Business Application Program at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto was comprised predominately of unemployed women. The program was free to students who passed an eligibility assessment. This training has given these people new skills and fortified their confidence to achieve a commendable success rate in job placement, yet the last group of students completed their final class in October 1997. The program has been cancelled because the federal government is transferring "labour market training" to the provinces as part of its devolution of power platform. To date no agreement has been reached with provincial government.

From its inception, I have been a member of the staff at Ryerson that teaches in the HRDC classes, so I write partly from a personal perspective. Other educational institutions provide similar programs for HRDC (the North York Board of Education and the Toronto School of Business, among others, and will also lose their HRDC funding), but the Ryerson project will be the principal focus here. One aim of this paper is to try to determine the reason for the significant imbalance of women to men in the courses, and a second consideration is to examine the nature of the program, including its effectiveness for the students involved.

As yet the Ontario Government has not signed a Labour Market Development Agreement (LMDA) with its federal counterpart, viewing the federal transfer of monies to Ontario for labour market training to be insufficient (Baldwin). This is commonly called the "fair share" issue. Ontario's position is that because the province pays more

in federal taxes than other provinces do, its share of training dollars should be greater. The federal counter is that this is not about fair share issues, it is about the reworking of labour market training (Ritchie). While this discussion continues, no word of plans or funding for further programming has been forthcoming. It is a certainty that whatever happens current programs will be altered.

Historical background

The HRDC Microcomputer Business Application Program (MCBA) at Ryerson was established in the fall of 1995 as a project developed by the federal government to upgrade computer skills of the unemployed. Most of the people in the courses are casualties of downsizing, while some, mostly recent graduates or women wishing to re-enter the labour force after a period of time at home with children, have not been employed. They take this program to enhance their marketability. The HRDC groups tend to reflect employment policies resulting from the recent recession which caused many organizations to reduce employee-numbers in order to conform to tighter budgets when "lean, mean" became the anthem of business. Many of the people in the courses are well-qualified but unable to secure work. According to Sandra Kerr, acting director of MCBA, as of August 1997, 519 students have moved through the program.

Under the supervision of Ryerson's dean of continuing education, Marilyn Booth, the project directed by Deanna Herod, began as a 20-week course. This was later reduced to 16 weeks focusing on upgrading computer skills which is complemented with other "employability skills" such as effective communications, résumé preparation, interview coaching, and team-building. Help is also provided with networking/job-search techniques. Additionally, Ryerson's range of counselling services are available for students in need of extra help. This study package is further augmented by "Lunch and Learn" brown bag sessions with visiting lecturers offering insights into new workplace realities, declining and growth market areas, and entrepreneurship, to list a few. In summary, the program provides excellent grounding in computer skills coupled with an awareness of business and interpersonal communications, plus an introduction into the current job market along with techniques to access it. People graduating from the course leave with good marketable skills and greatly improved personal confidence.

People applying to the program must be receiving Employment Insurance (what used to be called Unemployment Insurance) or social assistance and are required

to pass a multi-faceted examination which considers reading and writing comprehension levels. Students are asked to write a letter stating their goals and why they wish to take the course. This is one of the tools used to determine the level of articulation and communication abilities that students possess.

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Ratio of women to men

The proportion of women to men in these classes could not escape even the most casual observer. The figure offered by Sandra Kerr is 81.75 per cent to 19.25 per cent. Why is it that so many more women seek out this program? This is a question put to Ryerson personnel, some representatives of the HRDC project, and women in the courses. No formal study has been undertaken regarding the female/male ratio of attendees, but the following responses were offered to an informal questionnaire.

One thing that the staggering imbalance suggests is that when downsizing occurs, women are the first to be dismissed. It may say something about the nature of positions held by women as opposed to those held by men. The women may be in jobs that are more expendable when budget cuts result in downsizing. Sandra Kerr has a few ideas on the subject: "Men at higher levels of management who are dismissed receive out-placement service which may include updating of computer skills." If men and women are at equal job levels, Kerr speculates that "men might be inclined to take a short course on their own because they may relate more to independent study and want 'fast track' learning, where women may be group oriented." Kerr detects a difference in attitudes between men and women within the computer courses: "Men tend to jump in and bang away at it with confidence, where women tend to take more care when they begin." She notes that technology is redefining many jobs, and women are most affected by technology. Unfortunately, on-the-job training opportunities have historically been available to more men than to women (Kerr).

Marion Lush is the assistant for the HRCD project and handles much of the initial contact with new applicants during intake interviews. She observes that it seems to be

men who have the freedom (money) to buy the computers and therefore have more familiarity with them, whereas computers are not as big a priority with women who come into the program. Lush adds, however, that when women enroll in these classes it is because they realize that computer awareness is a job-reality today.

One of the women in the program, Andonica Huggins, sees the higher ratio of females to males in the courses as symptomatic of what she calls the "ghettoized workplace." In Huggins' view, "women dominate lower-paying jobs which offer less responsibility and decision-making. Historically women have been socialized to believe that it is easier for them to enter the workplace in these lower-level jobs involving computerized work." Huggins adds that

... trends in employment have been so indoctrinated into our psyche that we believe that computer training is route to job entry. It's the predominate thinking in the class—it becomes the route to access and many instructors are inclined to follow this pattern.

Huggins observes that men don't see themselves in micro-applications, rather, it is areas of programming, repair or related mechanical/technological work that attracts men. She notes that she has found the course helpful and now intends to target medium and senior-level management courses where she can learn more about spread sheets and developing budgets.

Elizabeth Sala, a former HRDC employee and later a student in the course has the perspective of a counsellor and a student. Much like Huggins, Sala says that women dominating clerical positions are paid less and when downsizing occurs these areas are the first to be reduced. Positions for microcomputer application are therefore in demand so training in this area is requested by many more women than men. Sala points out that women who have been out of the labour force must increase/improve their computer skills in order to re-enter the workplace. This view is supported by HRDC:

Historically, women have been channelled by schools and society into clerical administrative support roles. This accounts for the high ratio of females to males in the Microcomputer Business Application course[s].

HRDC Public Relations points out that the exact opposite gender ratio generally holds true for other high-tech computer courses that they organize such as Certified Network Engineer, Microsoft Systems Engineer, and Computer Programmers. Furthermore, HRDC stresses that the

department has tried over the years to address this imbalance by encouraging women, through a variety of interventions and initiatives to branch out into non-traditional occupations, but adds that it continues to be a slow process of change.

Is the program effective?

The HRDC program has enjoyed considerable success in five important ways:

1. It equips women with up-to-date computer skills. Students in the program receive expert upgrading in utilization of microcomputer business applications, e-mail, and the Internet, and graduate proficient in the multidisciplinary aspects of modern office functions.

2. It provides life-skills such as problem-solving and assertiveness training. People enter the courses experiencing the stress of job-loss, concern about their futures, and in many cases carry the emotional baggage of previous unpleasant work situations. Learning methods to cope with problems, and techniques to deal more effectively in future encounters equips students with life skills that serve well in the workplace and in personal relationships. For many it will be the only such counselling they will ever receive.

3. It builds their self-esteem. Many of the people who

enter these courses have suffered a severe blow to their confidence and question their self-worth. Support from classmates coupled with new skills and goal-plans do wonders to build esteem.

4. Ryerson personnel work with these women to help secure career-placement at the completion of the course. Final days of the course are geared to pro-active job search. Armed with networking and interview techniques, carefully prepared résumés and cover letters, students have access to fax machines, telephones, and staff assistance to brave the labour markets.

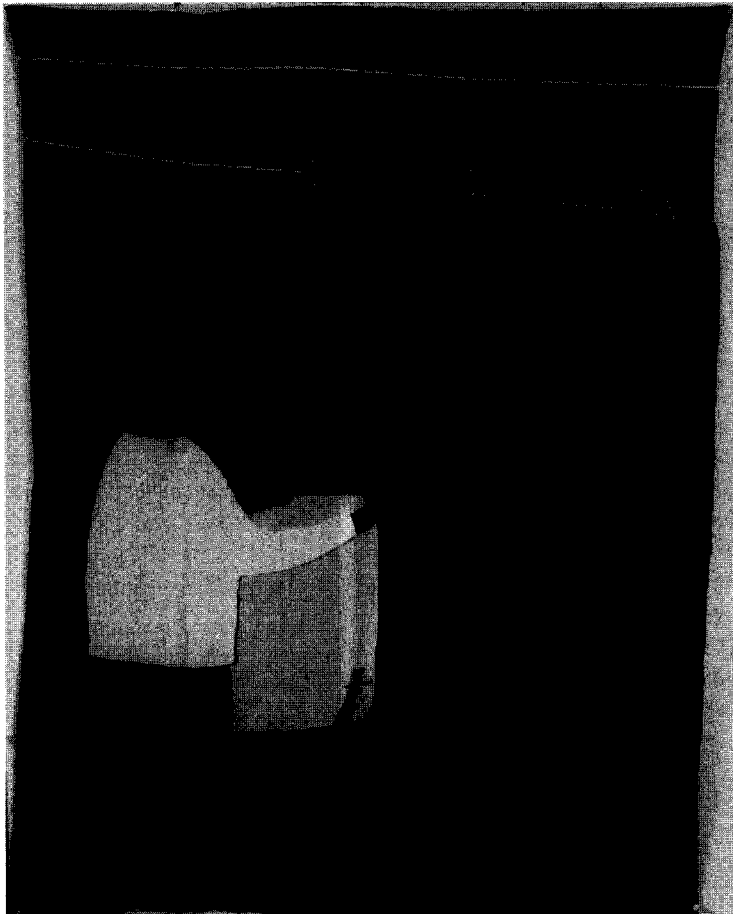
5. Eighty per cent of the graduates are successful in locating positions in the workplace. The program has consistently met the requirements of 80 per cent successful placements for graduates, although qualitative aspects of these placements have not been followed through.

Sandra Kerr informs us that HRDC will provide instead a new employment benefit called Skills, Loans and Grants, to assist eligible individuals to obtain skills for employment. The new model will provide an altered course of training which allows individuals to choose the kind of training they want/need, and when they have identified what it is and where it is offered, HRDC may agree to fund the course, if the applicant is eligible for funding. This is where a snag appears: the applicant will not be able to access funds for training until she/he has prepared an action plan which must be approved by an employment counsellor. The applicant will be expected to have thoroughly researched at least three sources for the course they wish to take. Loans will be provided to those who are ineligible for funding. Such loans will be repayable when the applicant is working. Several variations of rules and regulations are in place, but the end result is that course training will now be delivered on an individual basis (Kerr).

It would be incorrect to conclude that these new proposals will benefit the people wanting training. To pierce the mysteries that comprise this proposed new model demands a foray into a kaleidoscopic maze that cries for coherence, but from where will that coherence come when these training programs rest limbo-like in between two governments? In the meantime, those seeking counsel and training must ricochet their way through the torpor of bureaucracy. While some will still be able to access the training they want and have it paid for by Employment Insurance (if they are approved), for others it will necessitate taking a training loan. For many women in need of training, taking a loan to upgrade their skills is not realistic because their financial constraints militate against entering into such an arrangement.

After two years of preliminary discussions the federal and Ontario provincial government formally began Labour Market Development Agreement negotiations on April 30, 1998.

When these negotiations will be completed and what their outcome will be is impossible to know. One thing is fairly certain though: the likelihood of another free com-



Shlomit Segal, "Targeted Consumer," fabric collage, 3" x 3", 1995.
Photo: Ashok Charles

prehensive job-training program such as the microcomputer training program provide at Ryerson being offered again is very doubtful.

The author wishes to thank Professor Meg Luxton and Professor Barrie Wilson for reading the first draft of this paper and generously giving of their time and insights.

Ellen Case's MA thesis was a feminist examination of the achievements of Salome Alexandra, ancient Queen of Israel. Ellen is following doctoral studies in Women's Studies at York University.

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