

# Spiral up to SUCCESS

Discovering and building collaborative knowledge where gaps existed for individuals whose intersectional needs and identities were being underserved.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

### Program Background

- 1 year project
- Partnership between Gateway Association and Multicultural Health Brokers (MCHB)
- Used an innovative evaluation tool called Illuminate
- Focused on the intersectionality between newcomers to Canada who live with disability and/or mental health barriers

Spiral Up To Success is a project designed to enhance the capacity of two civil society organizations: Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative (MCHB) and Gateway Association, to deliver employment connection services to immigrants and refugees with multiple barriers to employment, including disability.

The project used an intersectionality and pan-disability inclusion lens to understand and address the vulnerabilities of each of our client groups for this new approach to service delivery.

### Goals

**Target: Newcomers with low English language skills, from backgrounds that are culturally distant from the Canadian context, experiencing significant barriers to employment, including disability**

This process involved deeply relational and culturally relevant support. We needed strategies for job matching and job carving rather than simply matching individuals with available positions. We aimed to increase:

- Capacity and understanding for both partner organizations
- Opportunities for economic participation in Edmonton for newcomers with multiple barriers to employment.

### Definition of Disability:

**Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life.**

Disability results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support.

Source: World Health Organization definition of Disability [www.who.int/health-topics/disability](http://www.who.int/health-topics/disability)

### Definition of Newcomer:

There isn't one definition of 'newcomer' so for the purpose of this program we included:

- recent immigrants
- established immigrants
- 2nd generation individuals, as well as
- racialized Canadians with various cultural backgrounds.

These groups have cultural identities affecting their experience as job seekers, are unfamiliar with the programs, processes and requirements of this country's employment sector, or both.

## The Illuminate Evaluation Process

The Illuminate evaluation process is rooted in stories, but then gamers statistics. The collecting and merging these two sets of **qualitative and quantitative** data, provided a rich description of the new knowledge and insights emerging from the project.

### Process

Project staff and the Illuminate team met to:

- scope the problem, project, and evaluation framework,
- co-design data collection instruments,
- learn data reporting and visualization,
- create a shared online environment for collaboration and sensemaking, and
- input brief narrative stories about the work (by project team).

**These micronarratives describe a lived experience, thought or wondering, a challenge or success, or an 'A-ha' moment.** Project staff collected 281 micronarratives throughout the course of this project. Staff input the micro-narratives in the online portal and complete a series of questions about the story. Once trained, each entry takes just 10-15 minutes to complete.

Every two months the project team and the evaluation team come together to reflect on and analyze the data and make course corrections or program enhancements as necessary.

The Illuminate platform also provides an opportunity for staff reflect on the story and plot an x on the triad to reflect the reality in the particular micronarrative.

>>>>>>>>For more about Illuminate

### Intersectionality Background

Intersectionality is rooted in Critical Race Theory (Cranshaw, K. 1989, 1991). It highlights the multidimensionality of the categories that may be translated into social inequalities, such as:

- race
- religion
- socio-economic status and
- gender
- immigration status
- ableness.

**Characteristics interact with each other to compound inequality or privilege. The intersection can cause a spiraling down of opportunity and privilege** because of the oppression, discrimination, domination, and other systemic processes resulting from the power imbalance.

Our aim with this program was to **spiral up** rather than spiral down the impact of intersectionality.

### What is Cultural Brokering?

**The act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of different cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change.**

This project brokered between different systems to advocate for the client and the different aspects of their identity.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

### Key Takeaways

- Working in relationship is key to success
- We connected with several clients by first agreeing to meet 'ineligible individuals' seeking employment support, which turned out to be a valuable way to build trust and relationship within ethnocultural communities.
- Success was possible when employers were open to accepting the full range of supports the employment support community could provide, including brokering communication and problem solving between various ethnocultural worldview and Canadian workplace culture even after the onboarding process.

### Successes

- 13 individuals found meaningful work
- 27 Edmontonians who, in the context of their cultural upbringing, never imagined gainful employment as an option because of their disability, now see employment as a realistic possibility.
- 27 families in Edmonton hold a new sense of hope for their loved ones that they could not have imagined before.
- 10+ staff members in 2 civil society organizations have developed relationships, knowledge sharing mechanisms and insight into the intersections of disability, cultural identities, and employment and as a result and have built capacity in both organizations.

## Insights... for the Immigrant-Serving Sector

### 1. The definition of disability

Explore the meaning of disability in the context of pervasive refugee experiences such as war, trauma, interrupted schooling, and displacement. More research is needed to understand the distinctions, overlaps, and relevance of this definition for our work.

### 2. Respectful language when talking about disability

There's an important link between identity and language in the disability community but variances between individuals. Some prefer to be referred to as a person living with a disability, others prefer 'disabled person'. We can't assume what feels respectful for the individual. It's okay to ask.

## Insights... for the Disability Sector

### 5. Trust issues experienced by immigrants, refugees, and racialized Canadians

Layers of mistrust exist in many immigrant communities due to experiences with authoritarian regimes, persecution, war and trauma, as well as lack of understanding of how the cultural systems in Canada work. Gateway staff learned more about the larger systemic reasons for this deeply embedded distrust. Sometimes trust could only be built by someone speaking their language: when MCHB Brokers were involved, newcomers were more willing to talk with Gateway staff as they knew they had an ally with them.

### 6. Family dynamics around disability differ across cultures

Some mainstream assumptions about the way families interpret the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of adult children with disabilities do not hold true in culturally different contexts. Staff learned to always challenge their assumptions.

### 7. Cultural value dimensions are important

The team learned about 'value dimensions' and how they differ across cultures. Values such as the concept of time (linear or circular); hierarchy (great power differential or a more flat structure); communication style (high context or low context); workplace relationships (transactional or relational focus) presented a new lens through which to understand those from diverse cultural backgrounds.

### 8. Mainstream systems steeped in colonial ways

Work in Canada is often reduced to accomplishing a task and celebrates being efficient, timesaving, and streamlined. This task-based focus clashes with many cultural perspectives and values, and can be a barrier for racialized job seekers. These practices can feel uncaring, impersonal, and even threatening. Most ethno-cultural groups respond best to a deeply relational, holistic approach. Gateway (with significant experience providing holistic and relational care to families and individuals with disabilities) deepened their understanding why this approach works especially well across cultures.

Hiring an individual from this pool of candidates resulted in significant positive change to the new hire, their family, the ethnocultural community, and the staff body and the organizational culture of the participating workplace.

There is much we still need to understand about disability, pan-disability, mental health issues, neuro-divergence, trauma, diverse cultural ways of knowing, to be able to respond to barriers, while at the same time, recognize personal resilience and cultural wealth.

Lack of resources is not the main problem – leveraging the knowledge, strengths and resources in the community by sharing more intentionally is key.

Mobilizing support for this target group now has a streamlined, relationship-based pathway to follow in Edmonton.

Bridge building with communities and employers, interagency collaboration, organizational learning

45+ employers have increased their knowledge and understanding of the benefits of supporting an inclusive workplace.

### 3. Processes for engaging employers are different

Conversations and strategies to entice employers toward more inclusive hiring differed greatly between the two sectors. Brokers found it daunting and unproductive to refer to "hiring a newcomer with disabilities" and had to rely on previous relationships with employers and a gradual introduction to the client's full identity. Employer motivations to hire diversity are different and the cross-sectoral teamwork approach brought opportunities to build on each other's strengths.

### 4. Diversity reflected in your space of work

MCHB has a warm, culturally rich atmosphere, which is further supported because the office is located in the Edmonton Intercultural Centre building (the old McCauley School) deep in the heart of the inner city. Through this project, Brokers began to notice that there was nothing in the space that reflected people living with disabilities. Additionally, it became embarrassingly obvious that the only space that was wheelchair-accessible (without no building elevator) was the gym.

### 9. Need to understand more about English language levels

Gateway staff increased their knowledge of various factors contributing to clients not having the opportunity to learn English and the impact of variable, and sometimes very low, English language levels. Working alongside MCHB Brokers allowed them to experience the ebbs and flows of when to rely on first language support, when to take the time to work slowly in English, and new ways to navigate language barriers.

### 10. Immigration status matters

Gateway staff became better-versed in the various immigration statuses and how they affected accessing services. Holding a status of Canadian citizen, Permanent Resident, Temporary Foreign Worker, Temporary Visa, Refugee Claimant, or undocumented migrant could automatically make a person eligible or ineligible for a certain service. Refugees had different pre-migration and post-migration experiences than an economic immigrant or international student. It was also surprise that some did not have a social insurance number.

### 11. Shame and discomfort around workplace accommodations

The mom of an adult child living with severe mental health issues shared with Brokers that she was ashamed because she had to ask for special leave from her work in order to get out to visit her son in Alberta Hospital. She was very uncomfortable asking her employer for such accommodation and was totally unaware of her rights as an employee to ask for such. Many immigrants have no experience in their home countries to make sense of employee rights and to know what is okay to ask and what is not. This issue is exacerbated with newcomer employees living with a disability.

### 12. Diversity reflected in your space of work.

The Gateway offices are located in a trendy modern building. The walls are covered with photos of participants and information on past projects. Soon into this joint project, Gateway staff remarked that "our building is very White... and the pictures are lovely, but I don't see racialized people." Like MCHB, this project heightened awareness of what kinds of diversity were visible and made to feel welcome in the space.

*We only have minimal contact after placing a job seeker. There doesn't seem to be any issues requiring our support or intervention. The thoughtful and extended preparation given to both the job seeker and the employer sets both parties up for success. Staff report when they reach out they get a clear message that...*

*"Things are going great, happy with my job, I am busy living my life and don't need your services anymore."*

## FUTURE

## Want to Start Your Own Program?

Reflect on your work as it related to the following priority areas:

- A-ha moments related to understanding of disability/mental health-based barriers and realities, the context of ethnocultural communities, cultural differences, pre/post migration experiences as they relate to employment.
- Insights into what knowledge, information, or supports that employers need.
- Insights into workplace accommodations that are needed.
- Insights into people's cultural value orientations and processes that support work across cultural contexts.

## Questions to Ask

- How would a cultural broker benefit your organization? What kinds of insights and relationship building could they bring?
- What benefits could a cultural broker bring to your organization?
- What pathways exist to connect to the communities you serve? How can those be strengthened?
- How are you making the time to build these relationships?
- How will you discover and make space for other identities not at the forefront of your service?
- How will you make it safe to talk about disability or intersecting identities so clients and their families understand employment is an option?
- How could you use an "equity line" in budget proposals to increase resources and capacity?

*"I love how efficient everything is... People really get things done quickly."*

**Admin systems in place at Gateway allow for more streamlined service delivery. MCHB puts relationships over tasks. To meaningfully involve marginalized voices requires a lot of time: for stories, for deep listening, for repetition.**

*"Whenever we praise efficiency, I wonder whose voices and what perspectives are missing."*

**MCHB strives to find the balance between efficiency and equity and has adapted some Gateway systems to improve the systems within the MCHB context.**

## Intersectional Learnings

### 1. Motivation for seeking employment

Motivating factors for seeking employment varied greatly across these two sectors of the population. Newcomers were asked more functional questions as part of their intake and the disability sector focused on 'what work would you find meaningful?'

### 2. Individual supports vs group support.

Group work sessions for participants were scrapped as it became evident each participant required personalized assistance tailored to their unique needs and challenges.

### 3. Walking alongside the jobseeker.

Cultural Brokers understood that appropriate employment support would need to look different than in other contexts. Because of the different barriers (from language to cultural) Brokers "walked alongside" participants all the way through the process. In one instance the Broker spent the entire first day of work with the participant; in another the Broker was present off screen during a zoom interview that unexpectedly ended up being a rather intimidating group interview for which the Broker was able to give background support.

### 4. Digital divide

Demographic or geographic gaps in access to technology services can become a huge job-seeking barrier. Newcomers to Canada are often unable to afford devices and may lack exposure to technology beyond a cell phone. Physical disabilities and inaccessibility in technology compounds this further. Digital support through the program was a major element for some clients.

### 5. Family dynamics

Cultural value dimensions are not consistent across cultural contexts (like who holds power in a household, what and how family members are expected to contribute, etc.). Cultural Brokers took extra time and care to navigate power dynamics within each family, consulting with MCHB colleagues from the same community for guidance. Approaching the interaction with respectful curiosity was key.

### 6. Holistic support

Employment preparations were much better served in tandem with other basic needs. Standard timelines need to be adjusted to accommodate individuals needing support with housing, childcare, English-speaking classes, pre-employment skills, food security, and other basic needs.

### 7. Indirect pathways to ethno-cultural communities

Disability is highly stigmatized in many cultures: those with disabilities often are kept out of sight, never leave their homes, and are not expected to work or participate in the community. Program staff asked the communities to guide them to adults with disabilities they could support. We got referrals "without disability" and ended up finding participants through conversations with a parent who didn't know they could ask for support. This experience reminds us of creative ways to access ethnocultural communities that would have been missed with traditional, linear-thinking models.

### 8. Internalized bias and stigma

It's crucial to approach conversations with cultural sensitivity, as the stigma of disability and mental illness varies significantly across different cultures and countries. Addressing the stigma is not a one-time conversation, but an ongoing process requiring trust and time. By recognizing the uniqueness of each individual's experience, and actively involving them in decision-making processes, they gain autonomy they might have lacked before.

### 9. Professional boundaries

Committing to a deeply relational approach is key to success in this intercultural, intersectional space. It resonates and builds trust with newcomer populations but Brokers found it tricky to balance this deep relationship with personal and professional boundaries. Brokers would feel uncomfortable not knowing how to balance competing instincts to protect and guide their client with honouring their autonomy. They learned to dwell in the ambiguity and found it best to seek guidance from a Cultural Broker from the specific community.



For more on the project visit: [spiralupproject.ca](http://spiralupproject.ca)



## More information

dolore molluptatus si nonse ni unt ea dolo int omminin re dolupta coria ex expello restor sit id quam quam sitem voles exerps.