



## Metrics Matter When Building a Sustainable Career Development Sector

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### Abstract

For close to 20 years, teams of Canadian career development professionals (CDPs) and researchers have studied efficient and effective strategies for measuring the impact of career and employment services on the lives of clients, and their families and communities. The goal has been to ensure those in frontline practice understand, and can articulate, the impact of their services including and beyond metrics important to funders (e.g., government) and create an important feedback loop that will ultimately improve both practice and policy. This article provides a brief history of inaugural research into measuring the value of career services, shares results from a small follow-up study conducted in Fall 2021, and demonstrates how a robust employability tool, seamlessly integrated into practice, can inspire CDPs to own their data and the incredible client stories these data tell.

**Keywords:** evidence-based practice, career development, reflective practitioner, career and employment services

### Metrics Matter When Building a Sustainable Career Development Sector

Those working in career and employment services / vocational guidance know their work has a positive impact on individual clients and, in turn, their families, communities, and even countries. Providing clear evidence of these positive impacts, however, is often a significant challenge for those working in the sector. Complicating efforts are funder and policy maker priorities which often do not capture the full impact of interventions. When success is defined as immediate return to work or enrolment in training the focus is on short-term gains rather than progress towards longer term labour market attachment and career success. Further,

when funders dictate the metrics collected and claim ownership of all data, the critical link between practice and outcomes is broken. When this link is broken, data on the impact of techniques, strategies, or approaches on the lives of clients is inaccessible, then reflective and intentional practice is limited. In all things, metrics and measurement matter.

In 2004, the Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG; Magnusson & Lalande, 2005) launched a preliminary study to explore how career development professionals (CDPs) evaluate the impact of their services with the penultimate goal of developing a framework and system for measuring the impact of career services.

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This work led to a 15-year journey to create a robust employability tool that would track progress and outcomes across a wide range of important indicators and seamlessly integrate into practice. The result was the Performance Recording Instrument for Meaningful Evaluation, or PRIME.

In late 2021, a team of researchers replicated, in a very small way, the 2004 CRWG study surfacing some very positive and somewhat alarming data around how front-line CDPs define evidence, understand how evidence impacts their practice, and how metrics matter in building a sustainable career development sector. In this paper we share results from the 2021 research, explore how a robust employability tool seamlessly integrated into practice can support reflective practice, and inspire, we hope, CDPs to own their data, use that data to nurture quality service, and create more client success stories.

### **A Brief Look into Return on Investment in Career Development**

In many countries a large portion of CDPs work in programs delivered by government ministries, or in agencies funded by government. As a result, day to day practice, including metrics collected, can be heavily influenced by government priorities. In this model, CDPs can often find themselves caught in the middle between a deep need, desire, and ethical obligation to support clients in achieving their goals and funders with expectations often focus on short-term job targets. As noted by McCarthy and Borbély-Pecze (2021), “becoming part of the policy agenda is a particular challenge for a field such as career guidance, which is viewed as an instrument to achieve a broad range of public policy goals rather than an end in itself” (p. 97).

Adding to this tension is how, or if, funders consider the broader evidence on how investment in career services and supports leads to important societal outcomes which may include lower

unemployment rates, fewer citizens needing government supports, improved health and well-being, and better employment outcomes for underrepresented populations or those farthest from the labour market. Unfortunately, “most empirical research has concentrated at the individual level, measuring short- and medium-term intervention specific learning outcomes” (Percy & Dodd, 2021, p. 36). As a result, it can be challenging to discern the true economic value of career development services.

Canada, for example, and more specifically Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) invests over \$3 billion annually (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022a; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022b) in career and employment related services and support. Much of this is transferred to provinces and territories via labour market development agreements (LMDA) and Workforce Development Agreements (WDA) that, in turn, fund services to their populations. Data collected are often narrowly focussed on short term metrics such as number of clients served, and number of clients employed but whether specific interventions can be directly attributed to client success is not clear. Further CDPs, their managers, supervisors, and employers and even the public (i.e., the taxpayer) have no idea if investment in these services is garnering desired returns. In other words, there is no data that demonstrates this is an effective use of public funds and is resulting in sustainable positive outcomes.

With no apparent roll-up and analysis of larger, more system-level impacts, contracts are renewed based on reported achievements on key performance indicators outlined within these contracts. Service provision and practice is then incentivized to meet these outcomes creating scenarios where the need to place a client into employment as quickly as possible drives practice and, in many cases, results in approaches geared at

reporting success, including favouring clients who are most likely to succeed (i.e., “creaming”), reporting clients as working because they are unreachable during the day, or counting clients as employed in one month, knowing that the job didn’t last. These, and other strategies, have been common practice and relatively well-known, though not often discussed, throughout Canada’s publicly funded career and employment services sector for quite some time and recently brought to the forefront in Delicate and Hoyt’s (2022) publication *Smoke & Mirrors: The Illusion of the Employment Services Sector*.

What is important in the context of our work isn’t how agencies may feel forced to report numbers to ensure continuity of service or how funders may be ignoring key questions related to efficacy of services. Instead, we look at how this impacts practice and, on a grander scale, professional identity, and pride in our work.

### The 2021 Research

With a small team and no funding, repeating the 2004 CRWG study was not possible. Yet, we knew the Canadian

career development landscape had changed significantly and practitioners were looking for ways to demonstrate the real difference their work was making in the lives of clients (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2018a). In the sections that follow, we share the study’s approach and an initial analysis of results.

### Participants

Career development practitioners, working in a variety of settings (e.g., public/gov’t funded employment services, post-secondary institutions, private practice) from every region in Canada were invited to participate using existing email lists, social media, and personal messages. All invitations included a request to share with their networks, with the goal of maximizing participation. Within the email, and as an introduction to the survey, participants were provided summary information regarding the purpose of the study, notified that all responses would be confidential and anonymous, and informed that proceeding to participate constituted consent. Table 1 provides a summary of study participants.

**Table 1: Summary of Study Participants**

<b>Region</b>	<b>No. of Participants</b>
West and Prairies	75
Ontario	104
Quebec	0
Maritimes	13
North	0
<b>Work Setting</b>	<b>No. of Participants</b>
Non-Profit Agency	96
K-12	5
Post-Secondary	43
Private Practice	16
Business/Corporation	12
Government	20
<b>Length of Time in Sector</b>	<b>No. Participants</b>
Less than 5 years	45
6-10 years	37
11-15 years	44
More than 16 years	66

This resulted in a total of 192 participants, all of whom responded to the full survey. Although a relatively small number, there was good representation across each of the demographic categories.

### Research Design

With the goal of doing a small pulse check of where Canadian CDPs are now with regards to evidence-based practice, the survey design was relatively simple, mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods (Bergman, 2011; Cresswell, 2015).

The qualitative component comprised four questions. The first two asked respondents to list 1-3 important outcomes their clients are achieving, that are being reported and to whom they are reporting this information. Next, they were asked to list 1-3 outcomes clients are achieving but which are not being reported. Finally, respondents were invited to share any other thoughts regarding data collection and its impact on their practice.

There were four quantitative questions, with simple yes/no response options. The first asked respondents whether the data they collect and report on is meaningful and accurately reflects outcomes achieved by clients. This was followed by a similar question but considered progress as well as outcomes. The third question explored if data collected enhances/strengthens practice

and the final question asked whether respondents were using a robust employability assessment tool.

### Results

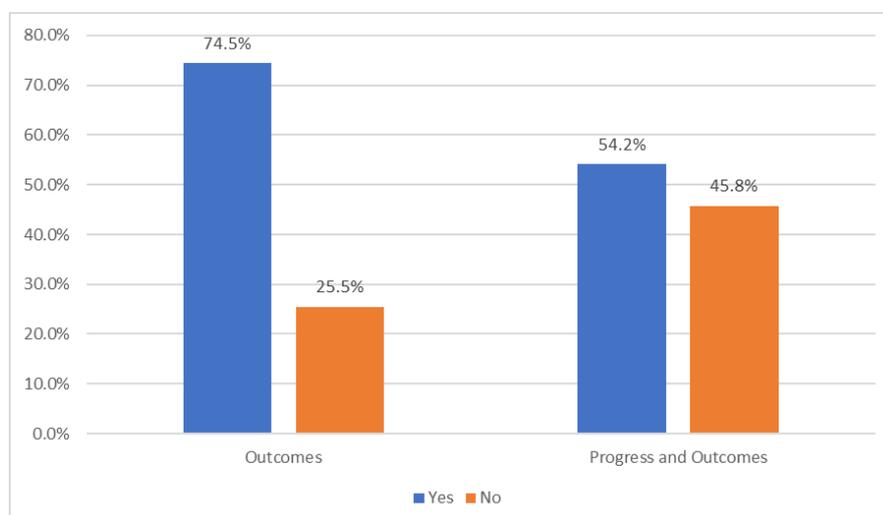
Respondents mentioned a range of standard outcomes being reported including program participation and completion rates, employment, in-training, workshop or seminar completion, and funding approvals. Other responses included resume and interview completion, service satisfaction, and clarity of career goals or action plans. The vast majority of the outcomes are being reported to various funding bodies (i.e., government).

Outcomes being achieved that are not reported include personal growth, increased confidence and resilience, improved mental health, quality of employment secured, and improved standard of living.

Based on this small sample, it seems clear that outcomes being reported are largely quantitative – easily counted and tracked. It is information easily reported via case management systems with little analysis required or expected. Whereas the outcomes achieved but not reported are harder to measure, track, and report on.

As shown in Figure 1, there were differences in whether data collected and reported on accurately reflect outcomes vs. progress and outcomes.

**Figure 1: Data Collected, Outcomes vs. Outcomes and Progress**



Three-quarters of respondents noted that the data they collect and report on accurately reflects outcomes achieved by their clients. However, when considering progress and outcomes, that number drops to just over 54% which seems to indicate that client progress is being reported less often. This again suggests that data that are harder to measure (e.g., client progress, increased confidence, improved mental health) are less likely to be tracked, and reported. A majority (65.6%) of respondents agree that the data they collect strengthens their practice which we saw as positive, though improvement is clearly needed. Lastly, only 26.6% of respondents reported using a robust employability assessment tool to support data collection and analysis.

In the years since the original CRWG research, and through the 2021 study, we have learned that the data being collected and reported remains mainly quantitative and limited in scope. We have also learned that clients achieve positive quantitative and qualitative outcomes and make significant progress towards their employment and career goals which is never reported. Despite massive amounts of data collection through CRMs, there is really nothing that can meaningfully inform policy or practice (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2018b). Further CDPs know this as well. The tools and techniques to track progress and outcomes are limited and CDPs are looking for easy ways to collect and report meaningful data that both enhances practice and meets funder requirements.

### **Spotlight on an Alternative Approach**

Beginning in 2011, the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) set out to address how the limited approach to metrics was, in turn, limiting reflective practice and the scope and quality of service delivery. In partnership with career service providers working with diverse consumers across New Brunswick, Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland/Labrador, CCDF and its technical partner, ARMS, worked to build a

new and fundamentally different approach to employability assessment, data collection, accountability, and quality service assurance. The result was PRIME. Combining rigorous research with frontline wisdom, PRIME is an approach to building a shared understanding of a person's employability strengths and challenges, and tracking changes – significant and incremental – to ensure services are constantly refined to mobilize strengths and address priority needs. PRIME uses an employability dimensions framework and integrates a range of powerful indicators of health and well-being, social integration, and labour market attachment to guide holistic service delivery and gather rich data to inform practice and policy.

PRIME is not a standardized assessment instrument and is not a checklist to be completed. Rather, it provides guidance to both the career professional and consumer to help them come to agreement about the consumer's key strengths and challenges. This data is collected at intake, and all along the process of service delivery, capturing progress and outcomes and providing government, supervisors, frontline workers, and clients with meaningful data to inform both policy and practice. PRIME is fully integrated into day-to-day delivery as it provides the frame for quality service. It is used collaboratively with clients, avoiding the need to enter data separate from client meetings. It was built in partnership with career professionals and their clients to ensure it reflects what matters and is structured in a way that seamlessly integrates into, and supports, good practice. Unlike most data currently being collected, this data actively feeds practice; consumers see how they are changing even when they may feel stuck and career professionals see the impact of their work and can adjust services accordingly.

In a 2018 study, career professionals from across six agencies in Newfoundland/Labrador serving diverse consumer groups used PRIME for a period of 18 months with clients from intake to exit

(Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2018a). The findings speak to three important benefits of a more robust approach to evaluation:

- It enables the career development sector to *take ownership of our own data*.
- It empowers the career development sector to *use that data for good*: to ensure our services mobilize consumers' strengths and are tailored to meet their need and to demonstrate to funders and the public the far-reaching impacts of quality service.
- It nurtures the career development sector, reinforcing the value of our work and *grounding us in our own professionalism*.

### Taking Ownership of Our Data

When funding is tied to externally defined outcomes that are limited and inadequate, as is often the case in public employment services, it is easy to feel trapped within those limitations and inadequacies. With PRIME, we found that it is possible to meet funders' data requirements and, at the same time, collect more meaningful metrics to feed quality service.

### Using Data for Good

Participants in the 2018 study reported that having the structure and flexibility embedded in PRIME enabled them to work both efficiently and deeply. It often served to break through periods of feeling "stuck" with a client and was highly motivating for both the client and the career professional to see, in real time, the progress being made. As one career professional noted, "Switching to PRIME was like turning on a light in the dark" (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2020, p. 20) PRIME provides evidence of client growth and impact of services. Clients in the 2018 study demonstrated statistically and clinically

significant positive changes in 36 employability factors, including 16 indicators of mental health and well-being.

### Grounding Us in Our Professionalism

Finally, the 2018 study demonstrated that owning our own data and having the tools needed to use data for good has a spin-off effect on overall professionalism. A survey was conducted with career professionals from across Newfoundland/Labrador, including both those who participated in the research and used PRIME and their peers who did not. In addition to collecting demographic data about the career professional and basic information their agency and clients served to confirm parity, the survey tool gathered quantitative and qualitative data regarding a wide range of factors contributing to professionalism. The data showed statistically significant positive changes in those practitioners who used PRIME relative to their peers who did not. Changes were seen across measures of the practitioners' professional identity, competence, ethical practice, accountability, quality service, impact, client engagement, commitment to professional growth, and connection to a broader professional community of practice nationally and internationally.

PRIME is just one example of a means to an end. Whether using an approach like PRIME or not, it is possible to take charge of our own metrics in a myriad of ways. The journey to becoming an evidence-based practitioner can start with simply asking clients to self-report on one indicator of change that is meaningful and committing to keep track of their answers. The important thing is not to gather all the data perfectly; it is to start gathering some meaningful data and using it to inform and strengthen practice and begin to inform better policy. Doing so feeds reflective practice, supports quality service, and provides an evidence-base to better inform policy. In these ways, metrics and measurement matter.

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### About the authors

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Dr. Deirdre Pickerell is a nationally recognized, award-winning, industry thought leader with over 30 years' experience as a career development specialist, human resource professional, and adult educator. She has a strong history of strategic and collaborative leadership, research and resource/program development, training and capacity building throughout the career and employment services sector. She has been an ardent advocate for evidence-based practice systems and strategies that help front-line practitioners establish a meaningful relationship with data. Email: [d.pickerell@ccdf.ca](mailto:d.pickerell@ccdf.ca)

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As CCDF's Executive Director, Sareena provides strategic leadership in Canada and internationally in areas of research and development, policy, and capacity building. Sareena has facilitated International Symposia on Career Development and Public Policy, contributed to the development of policy frameworks for the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training and the Council of Ministers of Education Canada and has served in an expert advisory role for the Forum of Labour Market Ministers' Labour Market Information Council. In addition to her role with CCDF, Sareena is the Chair of the International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy and was awarded the International Gold Medal for Leadership in Career Development in 2014. Email: [s.hopkins@ccdf.ca](mailto:s.hopkins@ccdf.ca)

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