

ESAF Case Study – Coordinator/Facilitator – Newfoundland and Labrador

Jennifer Brake Corner Brook, NL

For Jennifer Brake of Corner Brook, NL, it was trial by fire when she was hired as the Facilitator for the Essential Skills for Atlantic Fisheries (ESAF) program for the province. Within a week, the provincial Coordinator position opened up when the incumbent unexpectedly left for another position. So, in true trouper fashion, Jennifer took on both roles.

Little did she know, a pandemic would soon hit, too. But she made it through, and so did the program and its participants! Jennifer’s entire journey as the ESAF program’s lead employee in Newfoundland and Labrador has been one of being flexible, adjusting along the way and making sure that the program was as successful as possible for participants and employers.

She is the first to admit that it was not a typical 9-to-5 job embedded in routine. “This is definitely not a job for anyone who can’t handle curveballs,” she says. “When you’re dealing with people who are challenging themselves to step up to the plate to improve their lives, they need support. And so do the employers. I’m committed to the outcome that everyone has the best experience possible. Ideally, that means that every participant possible gets a job and an employer experiencing a labour shortage gets as many good workers as possible.”

Jennifer got the first of two ESAF cohorts up and running in February 2019, first with mentor training and then classroom training. Participant and employer recruitment for the cohort had taken place prior to her starting in the job.

“The program met with very good acceptance from potential employers because employee retention is a big problem,” she said. “An employer may need 100 people but can only get 50 who are qualified, for example. These employers need to draw on a bigger pool of individuals who have the necessary skills to work for them, such as literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.” Jennifer says that workforce shortages are openly discussed in the province and are a well-known issue.

Because of the seasonality of the fisheries industry, employers are dependent on their existing workforce to return to work when it is time to start processing. This is a difficult cycle in which to retain workers because many move away over time for more permanent full-time jobs, leaving the employers with the same amount of work but a reduced local pool of employees.

The first ESAF cohort had one participating employer in Benoit's Cove, while the second cohort had three employers, all of which were affiliated with each other and located in Black Duck Siding near Stephenville.

Participants in both cohorts received classroom training and a paid work term of six to eight weeks which was partially subsidized for the employer by the ESAF. In addition, participants were provided with a Chromebook computer which they could keep if they successfully completed the program. Supervisors were also provided training in order to help their own skills and help our participants to succeed."

There was no issue recruiting participants for both cohorts. In fact, there were waiting lists. Because of this, Jennifer suggests looking at ways to move the classroom training part permanently online in the future – outside of the necessity of doing so due to the pandemic – in order for more people to participate. Of course, this would entail ongoing support for participants while they became more familiar with the technology.

The ESAF has certain limitations for availability to potential participants, Jennifer says, but this was to be expected. First of all, there were not unlimited resources, so classroom training had to take place where the employers were. "We couldn't have it across the province even though we could have perhaps had more participants. We had to focus on one area. People had to get to class, at least during Cohort 1."

Jennifer says that it was also determined that the curriculum was not sufficient after Cohort 1 had completed their training. "We found ourselves needing to re-do the curriculum, which is what we did – and things went much better in Cohort 2, as far as classroom training went. When you're inventing something, sometimes you have to make adjustments along the way, and I'm pleased to say that we did it successfully."

Cohort 2 had 13 participants and had a week of classroom training and a half-day of training completed when the COVID-19 shutdown hit. "Some participants never used a computer before this, so there were lots of calls and hand-holding as we moved everything online," Jennifer says.

“There were calls at all hours of the day and night, which was nice to see because people wanted to complete their training. At one point, I had to maintain stricter office hours in order to maintain some control and order.”

While she admits that there were some discussions about suspending the program due to the pandemic, this would not solve the real workforce problems being experienced. In the end, the program went forward and adjusted – and so did participants and employers. “I did a lot of training over the phone on how to use a Chromebook,” she says. “Some participants even had no email address.”

“The biggest skill our Cohort 2 participants displayed,” says Jennifer, “was adaptability. They were real troupers. They also benefited from an improved curriculum from the first group.”

There were benefits of in-person vs. online training though, as the facilitator could notice things in person such as eye-rolling from students, but miss it online. Some life skills were better taught in person.

Cohort 2 students, however, had some benefits and learned things such as waiting one’s turn in the online learning environment. “There was better discussion online, which is the opposite of what you’d think,” Jennifer says. “It was more disciplined.”

Employers’ retention of participants was good in both cohorts, Jennifer says. Of the 11 participants in Cohort 1, four were eventually kept on by the crab fishery employer. In Cohort 2, 13 started, two left to collect the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and 11 stayed, all of whom were hired by the employer which had a number of divisions, including the eel fishery and agriculture (related to the eel fishery portion of the business).

“Programs such as ESAF have a profound positive effect not only on employers – who benefit from these new local hires – but the participants, who learn new skills and gain incredible self-confidence,” Jennifer says.

In Cohort 1, one participant was named the province’s Laubach Literacy Student of the year. “He lived in a small community and suffered from many barriers and hardships. He turned his life around and was the first one to class and was one of the best work placement successes we had. I would have never pegged him as a success because of the initial first impression he made on me, but he truly did blossom because of ESAF and is a new person now.”

“One Cohort 2 participant stands out for me,” she says. “He ended up on social assistance and didn’t think he’d ever amount to anything. When he started, he’d never used a computer, but he stuck with it and gained some much-needed confidence, especially after we switched to online. He saw his tenacity and follow-through as personal successes. He’s still with the employer and doing well. His life has changed.”

“It was lots of hard work, but it was well worth it,” she says. “Employers found good employees and a number of participants found new confidence within themselves to start working full time. And despite the pandemic, we plowed through and got things done. The program definitely works.”