

**A review of the literature**  
**A case for post-employment retention skills**

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**Mathieu Cormier, University of New Brunswick**

**Jeff Landine, University of New Brunswick**

**Andrea Rivera, University of New Brunswick**



## Introduction

The Hospitality Workers Training Centre (HWTC), in a Joint Labour Management Training Partnership with Toronto hotels and in partnership with the primary hospitality union, provides vocational training programs for individuals who experience barriers to employment. HWTC is dedicated to training new entrants to the hospitality industry and supporting the development and mobility of current workers in the industry. In that regard, they develop and deploy industry-specific training, based on the needs of industry partners, that supports the development of skills for the current workforce. This skills training, in addition to increasing employability, facilitates worker mobility and advancement. The training offered is short-term and one of the important benefits of what HWTC offers their clients is dedicated wraparound service coordination along with up to one year of post-employment support. HWTC primarily serves job seekers who have experienced systemic barriers to employment, with a focus on Ontario Works (OW) clients, Ontario Disability Supports Program (ODSP) recipients and individuals who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless. Over the past five years, they have trained individuals who had been unemployed for an average of 32 months, including many living in shelters or supportive housing, those with very low levels of English literacy, and job seekers with disabilities. In addition to new entrant training, a parallel mandate of HWTC is to provide training and skill development for current hospitality workers to support their skill development, mobility (including apprenticeships), and improved economic and social security. This training is supported through the Equal Opportunity Training Fund (EOTF), in negotiation with UNITE HERE Local 75.

The programs at HWTC have yielded positive results, with over 80% of the 500 program graduates over the last four years gainfully connected to quality employment opportunities within 3 months of graduation. At the one-year mark, more than 70% of program participants remain employed. These results are particularly compelling in light of the fact that, over the past three-year period, HWTC has engaged with over 50 employer and labour partners to serve a cross-section of Ontario's most vulnerable populations.

HWTC has entered into a partnership with Futureworx, a non-profit organization based in Truro, Nova Scotia, dedicated to helping people reach their full work potential. To achieve this end, Futureworx has, since 1984, focused on soft skill development, targeting the acquisition and retention of employment by people facing multiple barriers to success. To assess and support the development of soft skills, Futureworx developed the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT), which allows users to treat soft skills as program outcomes that can be addressed with intent in the same way as literacy or technical skills are addressed. There is a prevailing question in the earlier literature (Atkins, 1999), and one that persists in government and institutional thinking to some extent, about whether or not non-academic skills, referred to here as employability and retention skills, can be taught. Research has, however, shown that soft skills can be learned at a variety of stages of development (Kyllonen, 2013) and Dimartino & Castenado (2007) make a compelling case for the use of what they call "authentic assessment" (p.38) for developing applied skills.

The use of ESAT for employability skill development has allowed people facing multiple barriers to employment in some of Futureworx' Programs to complete programming and attain employment with success rates that typically exceed 80%. These programs have included sectors such as Hospitality and Food services, Warehousing, Continuing Care Assistance, Environmental Services and Restaurant Services. The Employability Skills Assessment Tool

(ESAT) engages job seekers in an individualized assessment of job readiness and supports the creation of individualized coaching and mentoring interventions to improve job readiness. The current initiative will explore the development of a framework for retention supports and complimentary adaptive assessment tools called Retention Skills Assessment Tool (RSAT) based on the ESAT. This new framework is intended to support the on-going employability of workers who are already employed and increase the likelihood of their retention in the workplace.

## **Purpose**

HWTC has proposed the creation of the first systematic and objective post-employment assessment tool in Canada. This assessment tool would inform the development and delivery of structured, individualized post-employment and retention supports to vulnerable entry-level workers. The objective of this initiative is to develop and test a tool to better support highly barriered new entrant workers in retaining employment and advancing in their careers.

## **Rationale – A Labour Market Issue**

Toronto's Hospitality and Food Service sector is one of the city's biggest economic contributors. Food service businesses are among Canada's largest employers, employing 6% of the country's total workforce. In Toronto, more than 224,000 people are employed in tourism related businesses. In Ontario, about 65% of the largest Accommodation and Food Service (ASF) businesses (500+ employees) are located in the Toronto economic region. This region showed the strongest AFS employment growth over the past decade, relative to the other economic regions, and it is expected to be a leader in growth over the next decade (Government of Canada, 2019). This growth in the sector, however, is at risk of being hampered by the inability to attract and sustain a workforce able to support this growth. The Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council predicts a labour shortage in the Hospitality Industry by 2025 as a result of demand for labour outpacing the supply of workers (Tourism Human Resources Canada, 2019). As Canada's fastest growing industry, the hospitality sector currently supports 1.7 million positions, (9.3% of all jobs in Canada) and will create 538,000 jobs between 2015 and 2035 to address this growing need. The total number of unfilled tourism jobs during the 2010–2035 period, however, is predicted to be close to 240,000, or 10.5% of the jobs that potential spending would support (Murray, Elliot, Simmonds, Madeley, & Taller, 2017; Tourism Human Resources Canada, 2019).

A further challenge is that this sector is characterized by high turnover, even more so than almost any other high-growth sector in Canada. Employee turnover is a common and expensive problem for tourism and hospitality sector operators. It is estimated that the average turnover in this sector in Canada is 70-80%, with turnover among hourly wage earners as high as 100-150%. Statistics Canada (2019) indicated that the average job tenure for all industries in 2018 was 102 months, while in the Accommodation and Food Services sector it was just under 55 months. HWTC graduates have proven to be employable, with 70% of program graduates gaining employment at program exit. More importantly, more than 70% remain employed at the critical one-year milestone. The one-year mark is considered a 'critical' period in the development of program graduates, as most clients who will leave their workplace, will do so within the first nine months of exiting the program. The goal of developing a Retention Skills Assessment Tool is related to the need to improve year-one employment retention outcomes. At HWTC, post-

employment support plans and activities are delivered by an in-house counsellor, who is responsible for identifying retention problems and providing access to retention interventions on a case-by-case basis. During this process, counsellors must often rely on intelligence gathered from participant and employer self-reports, typically after an intervention has become necessary. At this point the worker has left employment or has been terminated from their position for performance or behavioural issues. Objective or industry-informed tools or resources that enable better identification and support for retention, particularly among highly vulnerable workers, are limited if at all existent. This represents a critical gap in evidence-based workforce development programming in Canada. The labour market evidence clearly points to the need for the development of a resource that integrates a post-employment needs assessment and career-coaching interventions in order to better serve vulnerable and low-income workers.

## **Overview of the report**

HWTC asked for a review of the literature directed at answering the following three questions:

1. What does the literature say about the continuum of employability skills that lead into employment retention and retention skills for vulnerable workers? What does the literature provide, by way of an inclusive (across sectors and populations of workers) of **retention** and **retention skills**?
2. How have approaches to retention support been conceptualized and developed in Canada and comparable socioeconomic/political jurisdictions? This would include any assessments or metrics used to measure retention skills. It would also include any initiatives or tools used to develop retention skills.
3. What are the key ideas and recommendations related to retention that come from the literature? How do these provide some direction for the development of an RSAT and resources for developing retention skills?

## **Search parameters (How did we do it?)**

We conducted a search of the relevant academic and professional databases such as PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, ERIC, and Business Source Ultimate using a date range of 2005 to the present. We searched the “grey literature” for relevant documents using Google and Google Scholar. The global scope of references included Canada, US, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand. The following search terms were used: employment retention, employee retention, job retention, hospitality industry, employability, disadvantaged populations, vulnerable populations.

## **Retention and Employability**

There is widespread agreement that “soft skills”, one of the numerous terms used for employability skills in the literature, are essential to employment across sectors. There is less agreement, however, on how those skills are defined and what constitutes the quintessential list of employability skills. The reported skills gap referred to in the literature and in the media is an example of the continuing perception by employers that graduates of post-secondary education do not possess the employability skills needed to perform effectively on the job. Federal

governments, in particular in the UK, Australia and Canada, are increasingly leaning towards making public funding for these institutions at least partially contingent on rendering their graduates “work ready”, in the sense that they have the technical skills necessary for competence in their disciplinary field but also have the abilities necessary to negotiate the ever-changing world of work (Bridgstock, 2009). Atkins (1999), however, takes exception to a number of the assumptions underlying this employability agenda, including the belief that there is a common threshold of employability skills that all students should reach by the end of their undergraduate program or that these skills are even transferable.

In response to the question of what the literature says about the continuum of employability skills that lead into employment retention and retention skills, the literature is clearly divided between the skills that employees bring to bear on maintaining their employment (job retention) and the conditions and incentives that employers provide to retain their employees (employee retention). Our search of the literature resulted in references to the retention *of* skills or the retention of learning, but references to retention skills, in the context of skills for retaining employment, were non-existent. The literature related to skills for retaining employment most often referred to these skills as job retention skills. These skills are virtually indistinguishable from the lists of employability skills in the literature. For the sake of this review of the literature, job retention skills will be defined as, “the ability to keep a job for a certain period of time, usually 90 or 180 days or more, which shows that a worker has the skills to fit into the workplace and succeed in a job”, the definition used in the Montana Workforce Investment Act Terms and Definitions (State of Montana, 2013).

As the statistics in the previous section demonstrate, the retention of skilled workers (employee retention) is one of the biggest issues in the hospitality industry and turnover is a pressing concern. The steady loss of skilled people through retirement, turnover and changes in training demographics has created a deficit situation with regard to the availability of skilled workers. The concept of skills retention has been created in the literature to address the need and strategies to deal with the necessity of holding on to skilled employees. Skills retention programs, for example incentive packages, are designed to give skilled employees a reason to remain in the workplace. Murray et al. (2017) identified three threat to employee retention in the hospitality industry: poor supervision and little responsibility; mundane and repetitive jobs; inadequate compensation for customer service jobs that were, at times, stressful.

An interesting phenomena that should be mentioned, as it came up a number of times in the literature, is that of the “employability paradox” (Nelisse, Forrier & Verbruggen, 2017). This paradox states that activities that enhance an employee’s employability may increase job retention but may also increase the risk of employee turnover. Nelisse et al’s (2017) study indicated, however, that although skill development that led towards upward job transition was related to perceived external employability, increasing an employee’s perceived internal employability via skill development can also lead to employee retention. In fact, they were able to identify three ways that employee employability and retention can be enhanced: training opportunities on-the-job, upward job transitions, and skill utilization on the job.

While job retention skills are virtually unmentioned in the academic literature, there are examples of initiatives to develop skills for retaining employment in the “grey” literature. Denise Bissonnette (2004) has developed a series of webinars based on her book entitled *30 Ways to Shine As a New Employee: A Guide to Success in the Workplace*. The County of Wellington Employment Resource Centre (n.d.) in Guelph, Ontario has developed an online handbook, “Develop your job retention skills”, that offers seven strategies for keeping your job and

identifies flexibility, reliability, going to work everyday, cooperation, independence, a good attitude, and honesty, among others, as skills needed for job retention. There are numerous online references to workshops that provide the opportunity to improve job retention skills with “Now that you've got it, how do you keep it? Job retention strategies for youth at-risk” offered by Career Circuit Carrière (2019) and Champion Career Centre’s (n.d.) “Movin’ on up. Employment maintenance skills workshop” in Calgary, AB as just two examples.

While many factors can contribute to increased employee retention, selection of employees is one factor that may have the greatest effect (Bonn & Forbringer, 1992; Hendrick & Raspiller, 2011). This is because job fit is related to employee’s decisions to retain their employment (Penttila, 2004).

Finally, there is evidence to suggest that particularly vulnerable groups of jobseekers find it difficult to retain employment and often cycle between joblessness and precarious employment (Renner, Porter, & Preister, 2009). We start with a consideration of the factors that contribute to the inability of workers generally, but in particular vulnerable groups of workers, to retain employment in the next section.

### **Job Retention as Maintaining Employment**

One of the myths mentioned in a brainstorming session of the RSAT Project Advisory Committee was that soft skills are hard and fixed like a personality trait. While individual factors that impact job retention like motivation (Martin, Mactaggart & Bowden, 2006), customer orientation (Hennig-Thurau, 2004), self-monitoring and risk-aversion (Allen, Weeks, & Moffitt, 2005), are more closely aligned with personality traits, soft skill deficits can also have a deleterious impact on retention. Holzer, Stoll and Wissoker (2004) found that employers frequently note absenteeism and poor attitudes toward work, as problems that are strongly linked to turnover and weak job performance. There is a significant body of literature that speaks to the benefits of improving literacy skills in the workplace (Bloom, Burrows, Lafleur & Squires, 1997) and the connection between literacy skills and employability skills (Murray, Shillington, Gordon & Hardt, 2011). In addition to recognizing the need for students to develop employability skills, it is equally important to promote the acquisition of skills by adults that are already part of the labour force, as this will contribute to their ability to retain employment. This is especially true in the context of current demographic trends, like the gig economy, which will limit the contribution of initial education to overall skills accumulation in the future and increase the importance of supplying skills through adult training (Coulombe & Tremblay, 2005). Human Resources and Skills Development Canada refers to employability skills as being among the “building blocks” of nine essential skills, namely reading, document use, writing, oral communication, thinking, working with others, and continuous learning. They suggest that these soft skills, in addition to numeracy and digital technology, are essential for success in all workplaces (Cukier, Hodson & Omar, 2015).

A good fit with the work environment is important to maintaining employment and Bégin and Corbière (2012) found that employee congruence with workplace Holland codes was a significant predictor of both the employee’s intent to leave and their ability to thrive in a given workplace context.

While training in hard skills was the most important factor in supporting longer-term retention in some studies (Kellard, Heaver, Cebulla & Adelman, 2002), training in skills for maintaining employment is equally important. Training should involve continual development of hard and soft skills, addressing of skill deficits as they arise in the workplace and the targeted

development of skills in jobs at one level that will support advancement to jobs at a higher level of employment (Kellard et al., 2002).

The current literature related to the reasons for job termination is very limited in most industries, and in particular for the Hospitality and Tourism sector. In spite of the dearth of research in this area and the limited skill-based reasons for an employee to be let go, the existing literature does identify some risk factors for job termination in various industries.

## **Work absences**

The first factor that can lead to job termination is absences from the job, in particular absences due to being sick. Virtanen et al. (2006) conducted a study observing employment contracts and sickness absences in the year 1996, including terminations in 1997, as well as employment status in 1997 and 2000, for every temporary and permanent public sector employee in Finland. They found that women, and in particular those women in temporary employment situations, have a higher risk of job termination and unemployment. Additionally, they observed that older, permanent employees were also at a higher risk of job termination. In contrast, they found that for those employees with a permanent position, the high number of sick absences risk factor for job termination was not present. In a more recent study, Flach, Groothoff, and Bultmann (2013) looked at long-term absences in the private sector as a risk factor for job termination and found that those with higher numbers of absences were more likely to have a disability or develop a disability and both factors, disability and absences, increased the chances of their job being terminated. Employees with a mental disorder, a history of sick leave, those working in smaller companies, those presenting with work related problems, teachers or civil servants and those with low level psychological job hazards, such as workload, emotional demands, decision authority and skill discretion in the job were at increased risk of job loss during sick leave. In terms of health issues and the impact on work, men have difficulties with resolving financial strain and health issues, while woman showed recovery in their health (Huijts, Reeves, McKee & Stuckler, 2015).

Koopmans, Roelen, and Groothoff (2008), in a longitudinal study of employees of Dutch postal and telecommunications companies, determined that prior frequent and/or long-term absentees showed high work disability in a 4-year follow-up period and were at higher risk of involuntary job termination. They point out that short episodes of sickness absence often serve as a strategy for coping with bad health, and enable the employee to rest and recover more thoroughly than would have been possible when going to work. Those employees who do not take short-term sickness absence, and thereby push the limits of their health, are particularly prone to becoming significantly ill at a later date because of a lack of resistance. According to their results, frequent absence is an indicator for future long-term absence, and not a method of prevention.

Flach et al. (2013) pointed out that employees with lower levels of education have a higher risk of job loss during a sick leave than those with higher education. This is a variable that Li-Cheng and Tseng (2014) also discussed, stating that overeducated individuals are more likely to gain promotions or leave for better positions while undereducated, older individuals are more likely to have their jobs involuntarily terminated.

## **Skills deficits**

A second factor that can lead to job termination is a lack of skills or a skills mismatch with those required to do the job. Murray et al. (2017) discussed three key challenges facing the tourism industry with a direct impact on the labour shortage. Of these, one stands out in relation to job retention, namely the mismatch of skilled/unskilled labour supply and demand. Operators in the hospitality industry are finding it increasingly difficult to find staff who are able to combine technical skills and an understanding of the “essence of hospitality” (Murray et al., 2017, p.395). In addition, the attitudes and expectations of employees has changed, as fewer are willing to relocate, something that was an incentive the industry used effectively in the past, and they are more willing to change employers and industry quickly to align with personal values. Wang (2013) addressed the many skills that are considered to be ideal to the career success of an employee working in the hospitality industry. Skills such as a positive attitude, effective communication and interpersonal skills are crucial, while other skills are important but not as crucial, such as innovation, flexible working methods, adaptability to changing environments, ability to acquire new skills and self develop, problem-solving skills, long-term goal setting, resource management, teamwork skills, stress management, time management and “knowing competency”, something they described as “knowing why, knowing whom, and knowing how” (Wang, 2013, p. 998). Without the ability to develop or maintain the necessary skills, employees face an increased risk of job termination within the industry. Nevertheless, Li-Cheng and Tseng (2014) argued that skill development through intentional skills training can increase job performance and allow for better matching of employee skills to the required tasks of the job and thereby reduce the number of job terminations within the industry.

## **Socioeconomic factors**

In order to fully understand the effect of a lack of skills or the development of skills in employees and its effects on job termination, it is also important to understand the impact of two other factors related to job loss, namely socioeconomic factors and medical factors. As previously mentioned, women in temporary positions are more likely than men to have their job terminated, if they had more absences due to sickness. In addition older workers and those with lower education are more likely to have their job terminated compared to those who are younger or have higher levels of education. In regard to medical factors, it is important to note that people with physical disabilities are often seen as being “less skilled, require more supervision, increase health care costs, and have low levels of emotional adjustment” (Bjelland et al., 2010). Complicating matters, Muyia Nafukho, Roessler, and Kacirek (2010) pointed out that people with disabilities, such as sensory disabilities, anxiety disorder, depression, and learning disabilities, are more likely to claim discrimination over their discharge. Furthermore, these stereotypes and discriminations within the workplace can lead to mistreatment within the workplace, and an inability to advance within the workplace, possibly impeding the development of the skills necessary to retain their job.

## **Response to the environment**

Beyond the risk factors involving the employee’s socioeconomic demographic factors, medical factors and resulting behaviours (such as sick leaves), it is important to note the impact

of the psychological and physical environment of the workplace. The work environment can lead to job terminations when there is a perceived lack of support from co-workers and supervisors (Flach et al., 2013; Poulston, 2009). Flach et al. (2013) established how a lack of co-worker or supervisory support increased the chances of job loss, in addition to the effect of sick leaves. They point out that lack of support and problems with relationships within the workplace are factors that may affect the decision of an employee to leave the job, but for those who may not have that option, these factors may also lead to employers terminating an employee's contract. Regarding the environment, employers need to maintain a positive and safe environment for the employees if employees are to showcase their skills and be productive. A study by Poulston (2009) showed that employee dissatisfaction stemmed from low pay, poor relationships with their supervisors and the working conditions. Poulston (2009) discussed how these three factors, left unresolved, could create demotivation in employees and subsequent turnover in the industry. She also discusses how, even though there may be possibilities for growth and promotion within the organization, employees will not be motivated towards those if their working conditions are not satisfactory. This dissatisfaction and demotivation can lead employees to underperform in their tasks, leading them to have difficulties with their supervisors and co-workers and eventually leading them to job loss.

Skills for knowing how to manage the work environment, including relationships with supervisors and co-workers, facilitating opportunities for skill development and promotions and effective management of the employees' risk factors for termination such as type of employment (temporary versus permanent), sociodemographic variables (such as gender and age) and medical factors (such as physical disabilities and mental health concerns) could help to decrease the level of job terminations within the industry.

### **Employee Retention as Employer Responsibility**

Referring back to the brainstorming session of the RSAT Project Advisory Committee, in response to the question "Who will experience the most profound improvements from this initiative?", one astute committee member pointed out that improving the working experience so that employees want to stay and keep the job could go a long way toward alleviating the rate of employee turnover. The committee also pointed out that there is a prevailing, but stale, mentality that current practices are adequate and everything else is the fault of the candidate. In a time of labour shortage, however, this belief is short sighted. The committee recognized the need for a refocusing on engagement practices and the importance of a two-way relationship between employers and employees.

For the purposes of this research, and based on the prevailing direction in the literature, we have defined the concept of employee retention, as opposed to job retention, as any factor related to an employee choosing to remain with their current employer. In this section, we focus primarily on practices employers might put in place to retain staff, as well as other factors that appear to influence an employee's likelihood to leave. Glen (2006) provided a holistic matrix of nine employee engagement predictors that they grouped under the following headings: process, role challenge, values, work-life balance, information, stake/leverage/ and reward/recognition, management, work environment, and product. Govaerts, Kyndt, Dochy, and Baert (2011) pointed out in their research that when organisations want to retain their employees it is important to pay attention to the learning of employees. They made the case for letting people do more and learn more of what they are good at, as this will encourage them to stay with the

organisation. Their results concerning selected employee variables showed that only age had a significant relationship with retention. Regarding the intention to stay, there exists a positive relationship between increasing age and retention, leading us to believe that older employees are more likely to stay with an organization.

In contrast to much of the current research, some findings (McGinley, O'Neill, Damaske & Mattila, 2014) indicate that individual variables like job satisfaction and professional identity were not key factors in the decision to change careers. They found that dissatisfaction with career progression did seem very important, and work-life balance conflicts were found to be a key component of career change.

We have divided this section into several key themes found in the literature, namely: compensation, professional development and advancement, organizational affinity, interpersonal factors, flexibility and control, and mental health.

### **Compensation**

Compensation is perhaps the least surprising theme on this list, and many of the studies we looked at spoke of compensation as a significant factor related to retention. Employees who receive better salary and benefits are more likely to remain in their job (Jayawardena, 2017). It should be noted that the hospitality industry in particular is perceived as an industry in which low-paying jobs are the norm (Murray et al., 2017). While this may not be true for all employers, this lingering perception remains an important factor to consider. Given enough time, a more concerted effort to promote the industry in a more favourable financial light might help alleviate some of this social perception. Other compensation related considerations noted in the literature included practices like tip sharing and financial bonuses as ways of increasing overall income for hospitality industry employees (Jayawardena, 2017).

### **Professional Development and Advancement**

Compensation was not the only theme that showed up repeatedly in much of the literature. Just as common a theme throughout the literature reviewed was the importance of professional development and advancement opportunities for employees. Workplaces that offer more opportunities for promotions are more likely to retain staff (Jayawardena, 2017). There is one important caveat to consider, however, as this positive link was strongest when promotions were part of a larger set of opportunities related to skills development. In fact, some studies note that to promote without an emphasis on skills development can in fact lead to greater turnover rates rather than retention, as people then find themselves in jobs for which they do not feel adequately prepared (Moncarz, Zhao, & Kay, 2009). On a related note, several studies we found pointed to the importance of skills competency as well as development. Employees who felt that they were properly trained and well suited to complete the tasks asked of them, appeared less likely to consider leaving for another job (Nelissen, Forrier, & Verbruggen, 2017).

Professional development opportunities in general are noted as having a significant impact on employee retention (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003). Employers who provide opportunities for skills development, particularly during work hours, appear notably more likely to retain staff. This seems to be especially true with millennial populations who appear more likely to feel underutilized and more interested in consistent and ongoing skills development opportunities (Murray et al., 2017).

## **Organizational Affinity**

Though having a job may often be considered as primarily functional, as a way of making money, a number of studies we found noted the importance of employee connectedness or affinity (Moncarz, Zhao, & Kay, 2009) to the workplace or organisation. Drewery, Church, Pretti, & Nevison (2019) point to two factors that are consistently highlighted as important predictors of retention. The first is the degree to which one's work experience is engaging and the second is a strong psychological bond between employee and organization, called organizational commitment. Higher-level concepts like corporate culture and mission were found to be good, even great predictors of retention. More important still, appears to be the concept of perceived organizational support. In short, employees who feel their employer cares for them and their wellbeing are significantly more likely to stay in their jobs (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003). Along similar lines, one study looked at affinity through the lens of job embeddedness. Researchers here found that employees who are linked to their workplaces for more than just a salary are more likely to remain in their jobs (Hinkin & Tracey, 2010). If they perceive some loss in friendships or if they are otherwise embedded in the community where they are located (e.g. family in the area, involvement in local programs), these factors would also promote greater retention. It is worth noting that the opposite is also true in that a lack of embeddedness may in fact promote turnover and not simply encourage the status quo (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003).

The impact of organizational affinity also appears to extend beyond the individual and their immediate circle and into society as a whole. Employees who agree with and believe in a company's mission, vision, and goals, are more likely to feel connected to their workplace (Moncarz, Zhao, & Kay, 2009). One study in particular found a positive link between employee retention and corporate social initiatives. In this case, employees who were provided with the opportunity to assist community agencies and non-profits returned to their workplaces with not only a better sense of self, but also a greater appreciation for their employer (Bode, Singh, & Rogan, 2015).

## **Interpersonal Factors**

The importance of interpersonal relations in the workplace was highlighted in many studies. This included both interpersonal relationships between employees and their supervisors, as well as between the employees themselves (Hinkin & Tracey, 2010). With regards to supervisors, employee validation and feelings of respect are common factors of note. This factor also extends to involvement in decision-making. Employees who feel engaged in more than just the day-to-day routine are more likely to feel valued in the workplace and consequently appear more likely to stay in their jobs (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003). With regards to employees and their interpersonal relationships with other employees, workplaces that encourage friendships by way of group activities and programming appear, again, more likely to retain staff. This seems particularly important when employees are first entering a new workplace. In this context, providing positive early connections and experiences with others in the company appeared to pay dividends later in their work tenure (Hinkin & Tracey, 2010). In some respects, this appears to be once again due to job embeddedness. Employees who enjoyed the company of their peers were more likely to remain connected and interested at work as well (Yam, Raybould, & Gordon, 2018). Organizational support, in a study by Cho, Johanson & Guchait (2009), was shown to have had a positive impact on the intention of hospitality workers in the US to stay with their employer.

## **Flexibility and Control**

Providing perks like scheduling flexibility or the ability to work from home also appeared to have a positive impact on an employee's desire to stay with that company (Hinkin & Tracey, 2010). In fact, even simply changing jobs within the same organization so that employees could take up new tasks appeared to be enough to promote retention in many cases. Similarly, workplaces that provide more time for things like vacations, sabbaticals, or leaves are perhaps unsurprisingly found to have lower employee turnover (Deery, 2008). In terms of control, Spencer (1986) investigated the relationship between the extent to which employees have opportunities to voice dissatisfaction and voluntary turnover in hospital settings. His results show that, whether or not a union is present, high numbers of mechanisms for employee voice were associated with high retention rates.

## **Mental Health**

Finally, employee mental health is an emerging theme that seems poised to increase in prominence as a challenge to the workplace and as our society in general moves towards greater openness and the reduction of mental health stigmatization. Given the importance of one's work to their overall happiness, employees are more likely to leave jobs where they feel generally overworked or chronically stressed. Work-life balance was noted as being particularly important among millennial populations who appear to place a higher importance on their family and social lives outside of work than previous generations (Jayawardena, 2017). In a similar vein to the aforementioned theme of professional development, benefits and investments made in health-related programming and services were found to promote greater retention. Some examples noted included counselling, stress relief programs, sport clubs, and providing funded gym memberships (Murray et al., 2017).

## **Initiatives to assess and develop retention skills**

This section of the report provides an overview of the assessments or metrics used to measure retention skills, as well as any initiatives or tools used to develop retention skills identified in the literature. While standardized tests exist for some of the skills necessary for employment, literacy, writing and critical reasoning for example, many soft skills can only be assessed in context and just as there is little agreement on the definition of what constitutes an employability skill, there is little agreement on how these skills should be assessed (Cukier, Hodson, & Omar, 2015).

The literature identified only one assessment instrument labelled as an employment retention assessment. The Work Keys skill assessment battery, a pre-employment assessment tool (Hendrick & Raspiller, 2011), is a criterion-referenced test that is directly related to the requirements of a specific job. A two-tiered instrument that utilizes job profiling and skill assessment, Work Keys can be used as an assessment tool to identify skills and job fit and as an identification tool for assisting employees to target skill deficits. Developed by ACT Inc., it was used to investigate 12 companies that had conducted at least 20 Work Keys pre-employment assessments. The study results suggested a higher retention rate for those companies utilizing Work Keys as a pre-employment assessment tool (Hendrick & Raspiller, 2011).

Employee retention strategies are a key factor in keeping workers within the organization (Cloutier, Felusiak, Hill & Pemberton-Jones, 2015). They claim that organizations can positively effect employee retention by developing four strategies: effective communication between

employer and employee of the companies vision, mission and core values to ensure that the employees see their value and an opportunity to grow; hiring a diverse workforce; hiring appropriately skilled people; offering employees development and training programs. Christensen and Rog (2008) speak to the benefits of an effectively implemented “talent management strategy” that include improved employee recruitment and retention rates, and enhanced employee engagement.

Essential skills are seen as an important part of the area of employability program development and a report by Palameta, Myers & Conte (2013) describes some example models from around the world. The ones that address employability look at core outcomes of educational gains, entered employment and retained employment. Three broad types of programs related to retention and low-wage workers were evident in the literature: those that focus on assisting low-wage workers move to higher pay jobs (for example, Work-first or Job-Network programs); those assisting individuals with severe barriers to employment to find and retain jobs (for example, the Human Capital Development model); and those dealing with both retention and advancement and targeting a wide range of groups (Bloom, Hendra, Martinson & Scrivener, 2005).

Work-first or Labour Force Attachment models place the emphasis on rapid movement into work, rather than raising skill or education levels. Perkins and Scutella (2008) point out a number of reasons why work-first initiatives are not conducive to achieving good long-term employment outcomes, particularly for more disadvantaged job seekers. These include the strong focus they tend to have on short-term employment outcomes, by repeatedly placing job seekers in short-term positions to maximize outcome figures, rather than sustainable employment. Another concern is that the work-first approach tends to neglect skill development in favour of immediate employment, albeit in low pay/quality jobs that are often short-term and unstable. The emphasis on short-term low cost interventions and rapid movement into employment may also contribute to an inability to overcome more substantial barriers, both work-related (for example, perceived lack of competence) or non-work related (for example, mental health issues) to work. Often these programs lack emphasis on job quality, which can result in pressure to take any job regardless of the match with an individual’s skills or preferences, or opportunities for career development, something that can severely hamper advancement. Finally, these programs typically make minimal investment in employment retention and typically no investment in advancement as the focus is on initial employment.

Employment retention and advancement (ERA) programs, on the other hand, are becoming more prevalent in the US, the UK and to a lesser extent Canada and the rest of Europe (Perkins & Scutella, 2008). These programs typically modify existing employment assistance programs to have a greater focus on retention and advancement and are based on case management strategies and use of a combination of other interventions including financial incentives, skill development and employer incentives. Perkins and Scutella (2008) recommend that, to improve employment retention and advancement of low-skilled workers, in-work support and training for disadvantaged workers be provided, in particular for jobseekers re-entering the workforce after a prolonged jobless period. The benefit of these programs is that they are designed to improve human capital and longer-term prospects of the unemployed and low-paid by providing personal support that continues into the period following entry to work and encouraging training and skills development to improve opportunities for career advancement and wage progression.

Two of the larger programs that have been evaluated, the Jobs Initiative and the

Employment Retention and Advancement Project, have both recorded mixed results. Despite this, evaluations of these ERA programs (Kellard, Heaver, Cebulla & Adelman, 2002) are beginning to identify the features of such programs that are important for achieving success. Some of the features that have been shown to be effective in targeting the particular needs and retention of clients are effective case management, training, and financial incentives such as earnings supplements. Training, for both job readiness and hard skills, has been found to be most effective when it: makes use of a range of education options from on the job to fully accredited training; is closely linked with the skill requirements of employers in the local labour market; and fits with the client's home and work schedules (Perkins & Scutella, 2008). The ERA Project provided some strategies that succeeded in improving retention and earnings among low-income single parents and these include: supporting employment stability is a more effective strategy than encouraging job stability, that is, staying employed in the same job; earnings supplements, when tied to job retention and coupled with job coaching, can promote sustained employment and advancement; when considered by themselves, counselling and referrals to services to help people stay employed do not appear to increase employment retention and advancement (Hamilton & Scrivener, 2012).

In terms of helping retain employees once employed, Herman (2005) spoke to the benefits of training managers to be "employee retention specialists" (p.3). These HR specialists would, ideally, have competencies in: facilitating and sustaining organizational culture change; facilitating learning and performance improvement; utilize appropriate instruments to assess and measure relevant metrics; and develop, align, and integrate strategies for retention. Ranganathan (2018), in a study of the training experiences of women in the workforce for the first-time, found that women assigned to experienced trainers had a 20 percent greater probability of retaining their employment after three months. Finally, Renner et al. (2009) point to the need for effective supervision as an essential strategy for improving practice and worker retention.

Finally, some insight can be gained from research conducted in British Columbia (Robinson, 2017) that delved into how rural communities could attract and retain young employees. She advocates for initiatives that use the values of the potential employees and non-traditional factors like the ability to realize work/life balance and cultivating a sense of belonging in the community. These suggestions point to the need to consider the employee and their needs when it comes to initiatives to facilitate retention.

### **Addressing the needs of vulnerable populations**

Over the past 4 years, HWTC has engaged with a cross-section of Ontario's most vulnerable populations as training recipients: more than 10% live in shelters/supportive housing; more than 30% live with a (diagnosed) disability; more than 10% are newcomers to Canada (having lived here less than 5 years); more than 90% are dependent on financial supports (OW, ODSP, Youth, Refugee Status, etc.); more than 45% have high school equivalency or lower educational background. They also serve a population that experiences chronic unemployment with 32 months as the average length of unemployment before a course and some participants having been unemployed up to 10 years. The newcomers increasingly being served by HWTC are often engaged in their first training or job through HWTC first jobs in Canada, and therefore a lack of Canadian experience and knowledge of the local job market can be a significant barrier. In baseline assessments conducted by HWTC, over 70% of participants identify a lack of experience and skills as their primary barrier to employment.

Selecting employees from minority workforce categories, such as newcomers, the elderly and people with disabilities, not only provide quality workers that have promise for staying with the organization, but additionally, benefits any affirmative action plans the company may have (Bonn & Forbringer, 1992). Newcomers experience barriers, however, and Sethi (2015) examined responses from participants (newcomers and service providers) that highlight a lack of affordable childcare and poor transportation infrastructure in their home region as significant barriers to newcomers' ability to take education or employment courses, especially in the case of visible minority women.

With an increase in the number of people with disabilities entering the workforce and an increased demand for training to facilitate their skill development, initiatives that target the employability and retention of employees with disabilities can represent effective means for increasing vocational soft skills where deficits exist. Individuals with disabilities face persistent challenges in gaining meaningful employment one of which is a lack of employability skills. A study by Ju, Zhang and Pacha (2012) determined that employers considered certain skills as essential for all entry-level employees; however, there were noticeable differences between employers' expectations for employees with and without disabilities. The population of adults on the autism spectrum, one particular disability that continues to increase in prevalence, is gaining more attention in the employment literature. A newly developed "soft skills" curriculum, Supported Employment, Comprehensive Cognitive Enhancement, and Social Skills, was designed to enhance cognitive and social development in adults on the autism spectrum (Baker-Ericzén et al., 2018). Their research suggests that this training curriculum has promise as an intervention and can be easily integrated into existing employee support and training programs.

Mueser and Cook (2012) looked at the importance of supported employment and services provided to people with serious mental illness. They also discuss how there is a gap in knowledge about the career development activities and supports needed to help individuals achieve their educational goals and obtain and retain meaningful work.

Employability skills can be learned and assessment approaches are available that provide a vehicle for both testing and teaching skills such as effective self-management, communication, and problem solving (DiMartino & Castaneda, 2007). Unfortunately, these approaches are rarely used and involve experiential learning to a great degree. As a result, many segments of the population are disadvantaged in terms of access to the coaching, training and role models needed to develop these skills. Cultural biases may play a role in the definition and assessment of employability skills and may also affect the interpersonal relationships that contribute to retention. Moreover the boundaries between "skills" and "personality traits or habits" are blurred in the literature and in practice, particularly with respect to interpersonal skills. As this factor can have an even greater impact on vulnerable populations, a diversity lens is critical (Cukier, Hodson, & Omar, 2015).

## **Summary and direction**

This report was necessitated by the need to address employee retention concerns, as well as a concerning turnover rate in the face of looming labour shortages, for the hospitality industry in Canada. The intention of HWTC, working with Futureworx, is to develop a framework and tool that would help to assess and ameliorate the factors and skills that negatively impact worker retention. Increasing employee retention is seen as one possible response to a critical impending labour shortage.

The literature suggests that worker retention can be defined as consisting of two opposite but related perspectives. Job retention involves the skills, attitudes and behaviours necessary to maintain employment on the part of a worker. Employee retention refers to the efforts made by the employer to keep the employee, sometimes referred to in the literature as the talent, employed with their organization. It is important to note that in the world of employment, a deficit in work (and subsequent high unemployment), gives employers an advantage and employees have to ensure that they keep their jobs. During these times, job retention becomes a greater concern to the issue of retention. With an abundance of jobs, however, employers must compete to attract and hold onto the talent they need to meet client's needs and employee retention becomes the greater concern (Herman, 2005).

The literature is clear on the role of soft skills in attaining and retaining employment, though there does not appear to be a significant difference between the skills deemed necessary for employment and those needed to retain employment. The literature on job retention focuses on, to a great extent, ensuring that employees have the requisite skills to be successful in the workplace. In addition, the need for skills training with experienced trainers, supervisors and managers is clear. The research also addresses the negative impact on job retention arising from work absence, mental health concerns and disabilities. In addition, as Perkins & Scutella (2008) point out, joblessness and low-paid employment are persistent states, meaning that a majority of the clients HWTC works with will be battling the factors that would have them unemployed and, in some cases, homeless again.

A larger body of research is available relating to the needs of employees and efforts of employers to keep them satisfied. Tangible incentives such as compensation, benefits, promotions, professional development opportunities and positive work environments all are mentioned. In addition, a significant amount of research has been devoted to variables such as employee embeddedness, interpersonal relationships on the job, supportive supervision, flexibility and control have all been shown to increase intentions to not leave and employee retention.

While only one formal measure of retention skills was found, the literature does acknowledge that skills related to employment can be measured in a multitude of ways. The literature on the assessment and development of applied skills (employability, retention, or soft skills) is clear that, not only are these skills measurable, but the effective measurement of them can contribute to their development.

HWTC has spent the last four years working with vulnerable populations to help them train for and attain employment in the Hospitality sector. Their clients include newcomers to the country, people with disabilities, and people with limited education and low socio-economic status backgrounds. Among the barriers to long-term employment for these vulnerable groups are the persistent state of unemployment, lack of opportunity for skill development, language and literacy deficits and stereotyping. Stereotypes in regard to older employees, for example, often assume a lack productivity in the workplace but this belief has been studied and results showed that older employees improve their performance with age and older employees are more likely to stay in their jobs (Bjelland et al., 2010). In terms of mental health and disability concerns, one study we looked at explored how social protection agencies are responding in terms of employment rehabilitation services for employed people with acquired disabilities (McAnaney & Wynne, 2017). Specifically, their study reviewed job retention and return processes for workers with non-occupational health conditions and their results provided evidence of an acknowledgement of the needs of employed people with disabilities. The authors went on to say,

however, that there was substantial room for improvement in the job retention and return to work strategies in the jurisdictions that they studied.

One final recommendation from the literature is related to the negative impact that health issues and chronic absenteeism has on job retention. Research has shown that health literacy has a profound impact on health, as well as a broad range of other factors that also have a large impact on health. These factors include educational attainment, labour market success, income and social engagement. In terms of the significance to absences due to sickness, individuals with relatively high initial levels of health literacy accumulate health advantage over time, whereas individuals with relatively low initial levels of health literacy experience on-going health concerns (Murray & Shillington, 2012).

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