



Knack

**Putting Skills to Work
for Impact-driven
Companies**

Anna Migicovsky

Report on Findings 2015 – 2017



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Problem Introduction

Employment is an important pillar of health and wellbeing for many individuals, as it provides purpose, dignity and connection to a community. For those who are experiencing barriers to employment, finding employment opportunities that meet their unique needs can be extremely difficult. In response to this challenge, a movement is growing around the importance of social hiring. In this report, 'social hiring' refers to the hiring of a job seeker facing barriers to traditional employment.

Barriers to employment are unique to the individual and often complex. They include but are not limited to: physical and mental health, lack of education and training opportunities, taking care of loved ones (child care, seniors care), gap in employment history, criminal record, unstable housing, age, drug and/or alcohol abuse, limited language proficiency, generational trauma, entrenched poverty and employer bias. People may experience these barriers for short or longer periods of time, but they do not define the individual.

Being able to earn an income, however small, can be extremely important for individuals to experience independence and dignity, as well as have hope for the future. A 2017 report by Ernst and Young for Atira Property Management found that the top benefit of a strategic hiring program was

increased quality of life for the target employees.¹ The Social Return on Investment (SROI) was \$4.13: \$1, meaning that there was \$4.13 in social benefits (to the employee, community and government) for every \$1 spent by the employer.²

In addition to helping the employee, social hiring can help businesses address labour issues through use of a currently untapped resource. Large corporations, such as Walgreen's and Tim Horton's, have shown that hiring a mixed workforce positively impacts the financial bottom line of their operations.^{3,4}

Unfortunately, there are still large knowledge and skills gaps between job seekers with barriers to employment, businesses and agencies that support employment. In traditional businesses, hiring policies and procedures, especially for entry-level or low-skilled positions, can be additional barriers to applicants already facing barriers. Unemployment and underemployment are complex social and economic issues that need to be addressed through new approaches for connecting job seekers facing barriers with supportive employers.

1 Ernst and Young. (2017). *Social Impact of Hiring Target Employee Group Individuals*. Retrieved from <https://www.atira.bc.ca/sites/default/files/APMI%20Social%20Impact%20Report%20-%20July%202017.pdf>

2 Ernst and Young. (2017). *Social Impact of Hiring Target Employee Group Individuals*. Retrieved from <https://www.atira.bc.ca/sites/default/files/APMI%20Social%20Impact%20Report%20-%20July%202017.pdf>

3 <http://workplaceinitiative.org/case-studies/walgreens/>

4 <http://employabilities.ab.ca/2014/01/tim-hortons-hires-people-with-disabilities/>

One important part of the solution is to broaden the definition of employment to include income-generating activities that do not fall into traditional categories. Figure 1 shows the income-generation continuum, ranging from stigmatized and often illegal activities on the far left to unconventional methods in the middle and, finally, to the conventional 40-hour work week on the far right. By acknowledging the importance of those activities toward the middle of the continuum, government and employment agencies will be better equipped to create and find opportunities that suit the individual. Since 2015, Knack has built on this less traditional definition of employment to connect job seekers with a wide variety of income-generation activities.

Figure 1. The Income-Generation Continuum

**INFORMAL
ILLEGAL**

e.g. stealing, selling drugs

**INFORMAL
LEGAL**

e.g. binning

**STIPEND
HONORARIUM**

regular hours per week

**PAYCHEQUE
HOURLY**

guaranteed part-time hours

FOUNDATIONAL LIFE SKILLS

LABOUR FORCE ENGAGEMENT

**INFORMAL
NEGATIVE SANCTIONS**

e.g. sex work

**STIPEND
HONORARIUM**

irregular hours per week

**PAYCHEQUE
HOURLY**

no hours guaranteed
"0 hour" contract

**PAYCHEQUE
SALARY**

regular
usually full-time

Project Inception

In early 2015, Potluck Café Society (Potluck) developed a new employment initiative now known as Knack. Potluck has a two-fold mandate: to increase the food security of nutritionally vulnerable residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES); and to promote and support the adoption of inclusive hiring practices for residents of the DTES. Potluck envisions a DTES community where people have access to quality, nutritious food and enjoy opportunities for employment and self-determination. With this in mind, Potluck employs community residents who experience multiple barriers to employment. These employees are central to Potluck's identity and show great commitment to their work despite the challenges they face. Over the past 16 years, Potluck has become a national leader in supportive employment models.

With its depth of experience working with those facing barriers, Potluck created a program called Recipes for Success (RFS) in 2013 to support other social enterprises in the community involved in social hiring initiatives. The RFS team brought a specialized HR department to the doorstep of local businesses. The team mentored employers on how to navigate the practical and interpersonal considerations of hiring people facing multiple barriers. They also provided direct support to their own employees facing barriers to employment.

During this time, Potluck and RFS realized there was no clear path for people facing barriers to meaningful employment. In 2015, the idea for Knack, grew out of a 5-month long social innovation cohort hosted by the Vancouver Foundation, City of Vancouver, Community Action Initiative, Vancouver Coastal Health and First Nations Health Authority. At the end of this program, the general concept was to implement a platform that used digital badges to showcase the 'micro-skills' or 'assets' of individuals facing barriers. These badges would recognize their employment-related skills in a clear and common language, motivate them to learn new skills and earn more badges, as well as navigate the possibilities for future jobs through defined training paths.

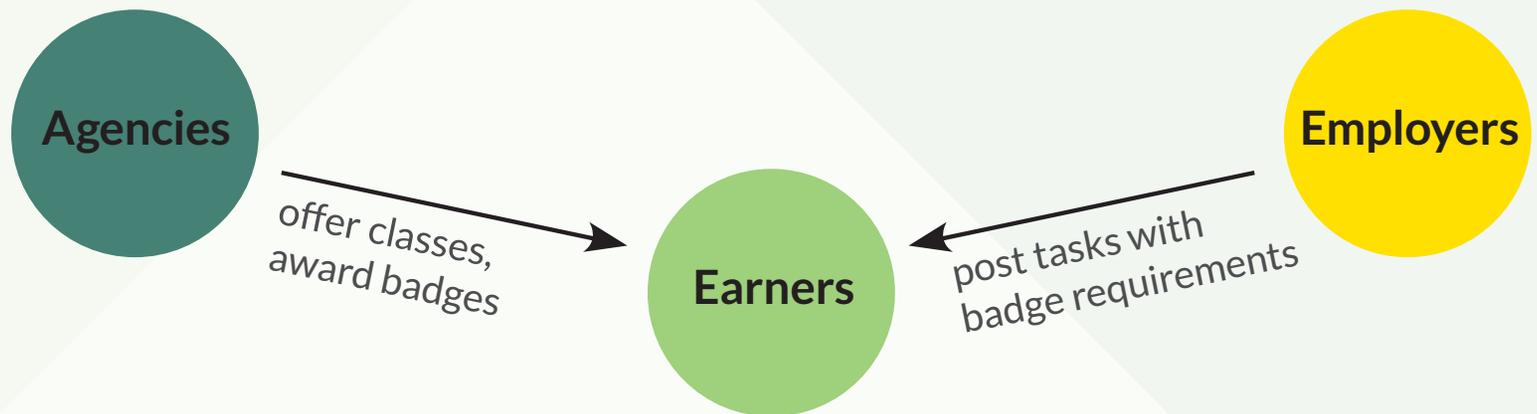
Knack aimed to work with 3 major stakeholder groups: Earners, Employers, and Agencies. The term 'Earner' refers to job seekers that receive badges for developing employment-related skills. This term acknowledges the hard work

associated with earning a badge, as well as the fact that they are on the path to earning an income! 'Employer' refers to hiring managers who understand Knack's commitment to establishing a supportive work environment for individuals facing barriers to employment. Lastly, 'Agencies' are social service agencies and other organizations that assist Earners along the employment continuum. In the Knack Model, Agencies assign badges to Earners for vetted skills, and Employers can post jobs or tasks with specific badges as hiring criteria. This is shown in Figure 2.

In partnership with the Local Economic Development Lab (LEDlab), Potluck hired a MITACS-funded graduate student to develop, implement and build on this concept. It was during implementation that we realized we were pursuing a solution to a highly complex problem. We leaped into a 'solution' of digital badges that had many moving parts and activities, which made it difficult to reflect, evaluate and be strategic moving forward. Resolving the tension of continuing to build the solution and clarifying what problems we are aiming to solve, has lead us to this stage, where we are stepping back and recording our activities and insights in this report. Moving forward, it is essential to identify key issues and clarify related project objectives to ensure that the Knack approach is as effective as possible. This report is a tool for evaluating Knack's activities over the past two years, as well as strategizing for the future.

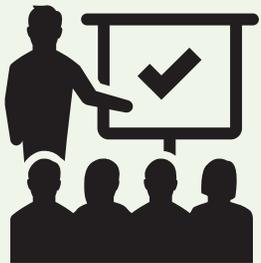
Insight *The purpose of this report is to summarize our activities and insights and set the stage for exploration of the next phase.*

Figure 2. Major Stakeholders/User Groups



Discovery, Testing and Implementation Phase

In September 2015, Knack identified the following core activities: (1) pre-employment training, (2) digital badge creation and disbursement, (3) job-seeker coaching, (4) employer consulting, (5) connecting job seekers with employment opportunities, and (6) evaluating the scalability of this work using technology. This section describes how we implemented these activities over the last two years.



PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

We developed curriculum for employment readiness training with our target population in mind (DTES residents). By creating an accessible employment readiness program (2-hours per class, once a week), we aimed to better understand the user group and their employment needs. These workshops allowed us to make strong in-person connections. As pre-employment workshops were not one of Potluck's core competencies, they took a lot of additional labour to coordi-

nate and facilitate. We ran 91 sessions. Over 98 participants attended and 53 completed the full suite of Soft Skill workshops. Our intent was to establish this group of 53 graduates as our roster of work-ready individuals, whom we could match with appropriate jobs as they came up.

👁 Insight *The majority of our job seekers needed additional one-on-one coaching time and placement into a supportive employer.*

We found that the skill-level and readiness of individuals going through the training wasn't as high as expected. The majority needed additional one-on-one coaching time and placement into a supportive employer (i.e. a social enterprise or Employer already taking on individuals facing barriers). The early concept for Knack was to connect vetted individuals with casual, one-off jobs or recurring, task-based jobs in traditional for-profit businesses. The training portion provided an opportunity to get to know the job seeker, begin to develop a trusting relationship with them and see how they worked in

a group atmosphere (especially with other individuals facing barriers to employment).

Our broad insight from training was that many DTES community members benefited from connections with peers and with the facilitator. They appreciated the routine of attending workshops once or twice a week and were proud at the end of the program when they received their awards and badges for skills learned. Only a handful of graduates from each cohort were motivated and ready to apply for jobs, and most of them still required more supportive opportunities. In total, the workshops allowed us to make over 65 connections with low-threshold income-generation opportunities for our graduates.

☆ **Highlight**

In total, the workshops allowed us to make over 65 connections with low-threshold income-generation opportunities for our graduates.

It took more effort than expected to advertise, recruit, interview, train and retain our participants over the 8-week workshop series. This process was labour intensive, as it was not a core activity at Potluck. The goal was to learn in-depth from community members about the process of finding employment, and we learned a lot about the incentives and motivations of different groups. By building relationships and spending time with people face-to-face, we were able to better understand the status quo from the target group's perspective.

Each workshop series cost about \$4,000–\$5,000 for a group of 10–15 participants. With time, these costs could decrease. Based on our experiences running the workshop 8 times over the past 2 years, it is integral to ensure that the program is as accessible as possible.

As part of this process, we prioritized human-centered design principles and made every opportunity to consult and engage with the many key players involved in this employment continuum. As shown in Figure 3, we connected with over 400 individuals from our stakeholder groups at an outreach level and from that pool, 102 became actively involved with our services and offerings.

To get Employers and Earners in the same room to learn from one another in an inclusive environment, we used a design thinking workshop template from Stanford Design School. The activity was to combine the expertise from local businesses and job seekers to test out new solutions for the hiring process. The workshop broke down societal barriers, created 'ideal world' solutions and increased empathy between both sides of this hiring conundrum. This event had 8 employers and 8 Knack Graduates in attendance. It was considered successful in terms of community engagement, but didn't lead us closer to our goal of creating a scalable way to facilitate matching between Employers and Earners. Time and energy were required to break down barriers between these two groups, and we realized this process couldn't be sped up using technology.

Figure 3. Engagement and Community Consultation

EARNER



EMPLOYER



AGENCY



TOTALS

421

174

105

INSIGHTS

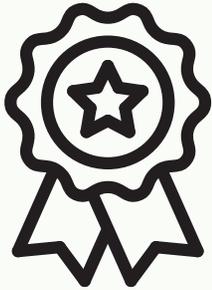
PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

When researching Employers' top priorities for new employees, we found that skills that enable employee retention are the most desirable (which we termed Soft Skills).

Coordinating a workshop series is time intensive.

Completion of a workshop series by a job seeker is not necessarily an accurate benchmark for that individual's skills; additional assessment is required.

The main value of the workshop series was that it allowed the Knack team to get to know job seekers in a friendly and supportive environment, which ultimately helped us to connect Earners with jobs suited to their needs. Training needs to be tied to specific job pipelines, tailored to industry.



CATEGORIZING SKILLS VIA DIGITAL BADGES

The concept for digital badges came at the inception of this project, with a goal to showcase the varied expertise of DTES residents through a micro-credential system. Resumes are a tool to show skills to an employer, but they can be deficiency-oriented by highlighting gaps in employment history. Job seekers may also have a hard time identifying the skills learned through workshops or volunteer experiences to display in this formal structure. Individuals in the DTES may not have certified degrees or even formal work experience, but they have gained employment skills through unconventional methods, for example, via workshops, volunteer work and sometimes informal work experiences. The digital badges would utilize the appreciative-inquiry model to showcase the

assets of the individuals without relying on the traditional resume. Digital badges are increasing in popularity within large corporations and post-secondary school systems to showcase incremental learning opportunities through professional development and experiential learning.

DESIGNING THE BADGE SYSTEM

As we were building our workshop curriculum, we associated a digital badge with each of the 2-hour workshops, as shown in Table 1. Initially, we wanted participants to be able to drop in for whichever sessions they were interested in and available to attend and thus receive a badge. However, we realized that individual badges had limited currency in the employment market. The workshop series was the most valuable when participants attended all 8 sessions. This allowed the Knack team to develop a clearer understanding of individuals'

<p>Badge: Workplace Communication (Learned)</p>	<p>Issuer (Org.) Potluck Cafe Society</p>
<p>Badge Design</p> 	<p>Description Get the skills needed to actively listen to others and articulate your ideas in a respectful manner so that you are heard and you achieve the goals you intended.</p> <p>Learning Outcomes Identify and evaluate four communication styles; communicate assertively by 1) building self-esteem, 2) using “I” statements to address problems, and 3) making requests; and demonstrate active listening.</p>

Table 1. Example of Learning Criteria for Knack’s Soft Skills

👁 Insight *If the badges don't help people secure employment, then they will be nothing more than a 'pat on the back' for the Earner.*

character and abilities, so that we could better support them on their road to employment. When individuals did not attend all 8 workshops, we were unsure if this meant they lacked commitment or, on the flip side, found a job without Knack support. Additionally, when individuals attended only one or a few workshops, it was difficult to determine if they would be able to consistently display their skills in the workplace.

When designing the badge system, we also wrestled with the question of size: how small should micro-credentials be while staying valuable for the purposes of finding employment? Our ultimate goal is to create a currency for these badges, so that they help people to secure employment. Otherwise, the badges will be nothing more than a 'pat on the back' for a job well done.

Throughout the design process, it has also been difficult to define the different skill levels achieved by participants. The language used is important, as we don't want to insult or embarrass the people we aim to empower. When working with our target population, we want to avoid authoritative, discriminating, and generally negative words as this is extremely demoralizing for an already vulnerable group. Currently, we are using the following four categories to show incremental levels: Learned, Practiced, Confident and Taught (shown in Table 2). The "learned" badge could be framed as a strictly participatory level.

👁 Insight *The language used is important, as we don't want to insult or embarrass the people we aim to empower.*

Level	Description
1. Learned	Has attended a workshop or completed coursework to understand concepts (theoretical environment). Some "learned" levels may include exam or quiz as part of badge verification.
2. Practiced	Has been vetted for utilizing the skill at a beginner level in a practical environment.
3. Confident	Has been observed utilizing this skill at an intermediate level in a practical environment.
4. Taught (Mentored)	Has significant experience and confidence in this skill and has been able to teach or on-board new volunteers/employees regarding this skill

Table 2. Incremental Levels for Skills

👁 Insight *Badges assigned for a 2-hour workshop session had limited currency in the employment market.*

Additionally, we tackled the challenge of creating a system that was clear and consistent, as well as adaptive. We were cautious of making too many sudden changes that could compromise the continuity, and therefore value, of the badges to both Earners and Employers.

However, we did make some adjustments during programming. For example, we developed a 'Train the Trainer' module where we invited our top graduates to teach the Soft Skills workshop series as peer facilitators. Once they completed their contract, they received both a wage and a newly developed 'Peer Facilitator' badge, rather than a 'Soft Skills – Level 4' badge. We provided a separate category of badge so that Earners could increase their skill level in the 'Peer Facilitator' category. If we were to go back in time, we would build a methodology around skills and levels before implementing it with Earners to provide clear objectives and reduce confusion. We would also better communicate the early-stage nature of the initiative to both Employers and Earners.

ALIGNING THE BADGE SYSTEM WITH EXISTING SKILLS FRAMEWORKS

This work to develop and test badging practices informed our higher-level goals: showcasing the initiatives and programs already doing this important work; and, clearly communicating it to Employers so they can find the skilled labour they need. To get some baseline data, we mapped the current landscape of Agencies and program offerings. We completed an environmental scan of over 75 different programs.

By speaking to Agency staff and sifting through online material and posters, we collected data on programs delivered and skills taught to the target population. Many programs provide frameworks and tools for practicing these skills, but there is no standardized assessment tool to confirm if an individual has these qualities. This made it difficult to compare and contrast the skills associated with different programs. So for many programs, we saw a universal challenge presented by the obvious value in being able to standardize assessment.

👁 Insight *Many programs provide frameworks and tools to practice soft skills, but there is no standardized assessment tool to confirm if an individual has these qualities.*

We developed strong relationships with some of these Agencies and shared our concept for badging with them. As a result, they began to reach out to us for help implementing badges as part of their own programming. Some Agencies contracted Knack to lead Soft Skills workshops inside their own organizations. Others wanted to introduce badges as a way of recognizing participants who were completing in-house training. Table 3 displays the badges awarded through these Agencies, whether through Knack or in-house training. In future, we could develop these relationships further by building out assessment models and curriculum standards. For example, Knack could facilitate the creation of badges for the Bidders' Project. Thus creating structure to their hiring and training processes and creating a clear path to more income-generating opportunities internally and externally.

Table 3. Piloting Badges for Internal and External Agencies

**541
EARNERS**

KNACK SOFT SKILLS SERIES



**203
EARNERS**

KITCHEN HARD SKILLS SERIES



**27
EARNERS**

CUSTOMIZED BADGES



MP Specific Badges



Peer Facilitator Badges



SFU Conference Ambassador



**108
EARNERS**

As a next step, we could build an assessment tool for Agencies that will be awarding the badges for skills gained through these more unconventional means. When we look at building out this tool, it is important that we take on a trauma-informed perspective. When working with individuals facing barriers, we have to acknowledge that the systems in place have not been satisfactory at assisting them. We need to be compassionate around how we collect information (in-take forms, assessments, evaluations). While this process is important for obtaining valuable data, it can also create triggers and more barriers that prevent people from accessing resources. After speaking to groups across Canada involved in the employment continuum, there is potential for collaboration in this area.

CONNECTING KEY STAKEHOLDERS WITH THE BADGE SYSTEM

The final challenges we faced were distributing badges to Earners and broadcasting badges to key stakeholders, including Agencies and Employers. By speaking with DTES residents and other service agencies, we learned there is considerable concern with respect to privacy and management of personal information if shared between organizations. Ideally, we would use the badge concept to build an online community in which individuals have profiles similar to LinkedIn profiles. This online community would focus on jobs accessible to the target population. It would also help Employers gain access to an untapped – but vetted and skilled – labour pool.

In our early implementation stage (Sept 2015), we used Credly, an online Open Badge platform (Figure 2). We chose this option as it was free for all users and aesthetically pleas-

ing. We also considered the Mozilla Open Badge Backpack, but this was less visually appealing and required more set-up for Earners and Agencies. We assigned a Credly account to about a dozen Earners during their Computer Literacy workshop session in the first two cohorts.

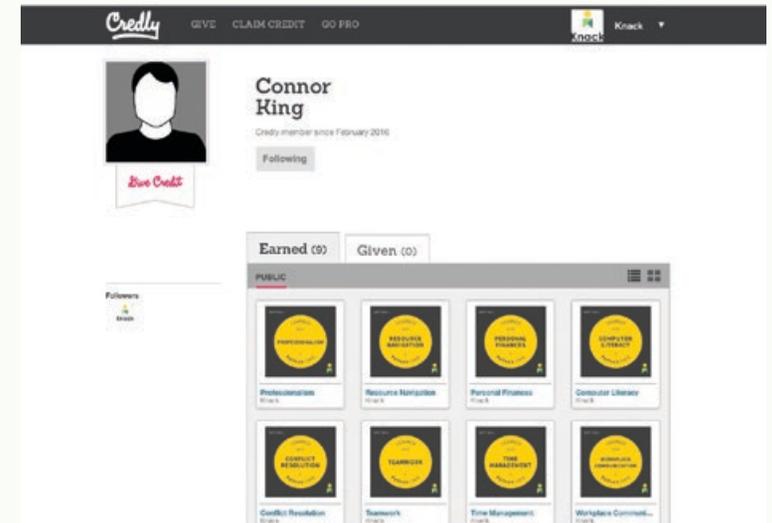


Figure 2. Sample Credly Profile Page of Job Seeker

Throughout this trial period, we learned that many people have trouble remembering passwords and email addresses used to set up accounts. As Knack was only awarding badges to accounts, we were not able to administer accounts or reset passwords for our Earners. This limited our ability to help when complications arose. Additionally, many people did not set their account to 'public,' so we weren't able to see their profiles or send profiles to Employers as intended. We had also hoped that Earners and Agencies awarding badges would share events, updates and successes using a news-feed function. Unfortunately, we were unable to encourage this level of engagement with Credly.

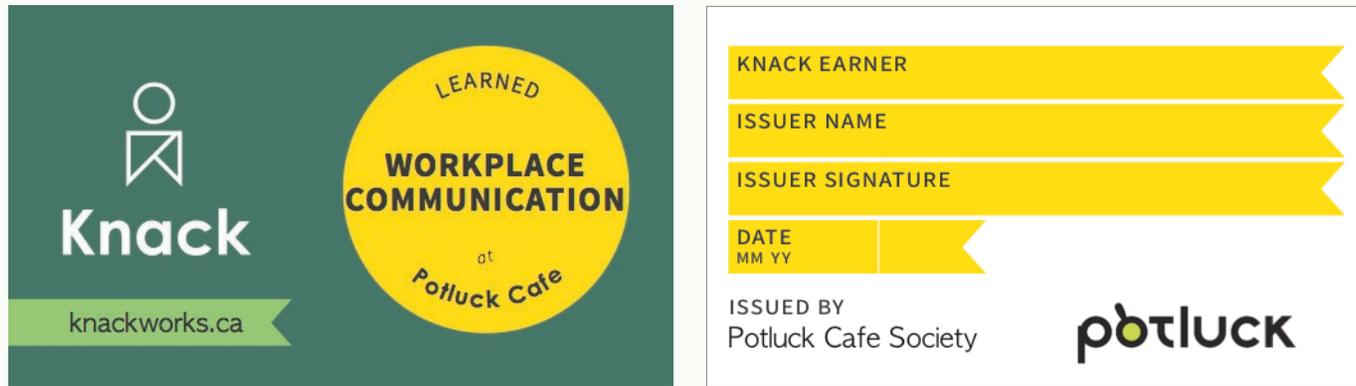


Figure 4. Sample Physical Badge (Left: Front side, Right: Back side)

After the first two cohorts, we adjusted our expectations and focused on the idea behind badges. We used a physical badge the size of a business card (Figure 4) to recognize individuals for their hard work and to help them communicate their skills to Employers. We had great feedback from some of our Earners; they were proud of earning these micro-credentials. One of our partners at Hives for Humanity even sent us a picture of an Earner proudly holding up all his earned badges!

More research is required around convenient and meaningful methods to distribute and share badges with our different stakeholder groups. We could see Agencies taking on this role of awarding the physical badge directly to Earners. They would need to do some administrative activities to record Earners' details (e.g. badges awarded and contact information) and share this information with an umbrella-like organization. We would need the Agency's buy-in to award the badges and provide reports to this central body. This would also need to address privacy concerns regarding information transfer and

storage. There could be significant benefits for Agencies that award badges, as this could be integrated into their outcome reporting for grants and programs. The quality control of awarded badges will be a consideration in the future, as we will have to trust Agencies on their own assessment of skills.

Insight *DTES residents weren't engaged with the online Digital Badging platform, which may reflect their disinterest in online social media or mean that they didn't see the value of the profile.*

INSIGHTS

CATEGORIZING SKILLS VIA DIGITAL BADGES

- Badges may need to include a physical and digital element.
- We need to employ experts to determine a methodology for benchmarking and standardizing employment-related skills.
- Privacy concerns are a significant barrier to sharing information on job seekers on a shared platform or database.
- We need significant buy-in from Agencies to develop a robust and resilient badging ecosystem.





EMPLOYER CONSULTING

Initially, we designed Knack to meet the needs of Employers, creating a 'demand-led' approach to hiring. However, Potluck's mission is to create jobs for those facing barriers to employment. This led Knack to have a dual focus: supporting Earners to develop job-related skills and also supporting Employers to hire eligible Earners. This was a major challenge, as we had to balance the needs of Earners with the needs of Employers. The gap between Employers' needs and Earners' skills also created considerable tension. We were caught between the two groups and struggled to identify a primary user group.

Insight *Potluck's mission to create jobs for those facing barriers to employment led Knack to adopt a dual focus, which was a major challenge.*

We spoke directly with Employers to identify the challenges they associated with social hiring. Over 100 employers connected with us, interested and eager to find new channels for recruiting for their labour needs. This showed that there was a demand for low-skilled labour, which has also been substantiated in recent labour market reports for the hospitality, retail, and food and beverage sectors. We were pleased that Employers

viewed our small pilot project as a potential remedy for their hiring challenges. This was due, in part, to the positive reputation that Potluck has built over the years.

Our pitch to Employers evolved over time, but our core idea was that employment should be re-imagined. Employment does not have to mean 8-hour shifts or 40-hour work weeks. The benefits of employment can be gained by doing smaller amounts of work, such as task-based labour or 4-hour shifts. Employment provides Earners with extra cash, which could increase their quality of life by allowing them to make health-

ier food and lifestyle decisions. The routine of going to work could provide valuable structure and also decrease isolation. People who have been patients or on the receiving end of social systems could also appreciate opportunities to give back and contribute.

Most of our target population was on some level of income assistance. For these Earners, the earning exemptions limit was a strong disincentive for pursuing formal employment. Although income assistance amounts are quite low, many people are comforted to know that they will receive a cheque every month, which can contribute to essentials like rent. Earning close to the exemption limit is daunting, due to the risk of losing income assistance if the limit is exceeded. To encourage the target population to apply for and succeed in entering the workforce, there needed to be changes around the hiring process and the way jobs were laid out. The majority of Employers listened and agreed, but weren't able to see this happening at their place of business. They felt they were already at their maximum capacity.

Small business owners tend to hire a handful of trusted staff and keep them on mainly full-time. The staff are hired and trained in all areas, including cashier, customer service, technology for taking orders and making payment, as well as keeping a clean and organized work environment. In these small establishments, managers often do menial tasks during their

Insight *The majority of employers listened and agreed, but weren't able to see this happening at their place of business.*

shifts. It's easier for them to do these tasks themselves – and to their standard – than to hire short-term, task-based labour. Earners require customized job descriptions, as well as support and mentorship from colleagues without barriers. Other accommodations are also required for payment and proactive communication around workplace norms. Despite the many 'Help Wanted' signs throughout the city, Employers and the jobs they offer do not yet meet the needs of our target population.

We also spoke with HR staff at larger companies. We found that there are certain policies and eligibility requirements that prevent our target population from even putting an application into the mix. Executives are eager to participate in social hiring, as this is a 'virtue signal' for their company. However, their interest diminishes when front-line managers are unable to provide the extra capacity needed for training and supportive employment. Unions with strict job descriptions and HR policies that require criminal record checks are big red flags when trying to initiate conversations about social hiring with larger businesses. This is reasonable, as businesses are concerned with fairness, safety and consistency for the other staff, but Knack's target population often does not fit within union definitions/requirements.

Small pilot projects are working to educate larger businesses and generate opportunities for job seekers who face barriers to get a foot in the door. Two of these initiatives are BC Partners in Workforce Innovation and HireUP Youth, which are funded by the BC Government and the Federal Government, respectively. Both these initiatives connect the

HR teams of larger companies with different service agencies working at the frontlines. These pilot projects use a demand-led approach. They help Employers to adjust their expectations and needs according to the skills available in the target population – while still maintaining certain hiring standards.

Small businesses don't have the capacity to support the target population, as they need employees with a diverse skill set and the ability to handle a high degree of responsibility. By contrast, large businesses have standardized HR procedures, which would need to be changed significantly to accommodate the target population. Medium-sized businesses may be the sweet spot, as they can effectively job-carve and create extra capacity to support new employees. Other smaller employers may increase their efforts once they see the success of medium-sized businesses.

We also worked closely with SFU to develop an inclusive hiring and training package that enabled the hiring of community members for a 5-day conference in May 2017. Knack helped to define the skills required for these positions, as well as to coordinate, recruit and train 70+ community residents from Surrey and the DTES. SFU was thrilled with Knack's contribution and is in the process of building a more sustainable system for creating short-term employment opportunities at their on-campus events.



INSIGHTS

EMPLOYER CONSULTING

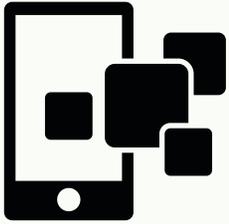
There needs to be more advocacy on behalf of the target population, as there is considerable false information and stigma surrounding poverty and the income assistance system.

Many businesses experience very real labour shortages.

Employers have limited time and money to allocate to social hiring.

Many HR policies are rigid and offer little to no flexibility when it comes to accommodating the target population.

It may be difficult for Knack to effectively serve both Employers and Earners.



ONLINE PLATFORM

We also investigated existing tools for meeting the needs of this unique marketplace. Like digital badges, the gig economy' was (and is) growing alongside the mainstream economy. The gig economy is a labour market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work, as opposed to permanent jobs. Looking at apps like 'Task-Rabbit,' we saw opportunities to use technology to decrease the high costs associated with matching Earners and Employers, vetting both user groups, establishing contracts and processing payments. By recording our steps when matching individuals to jobs and streamlining job postings and requirement language through Google Forms, we built an analogue version of our system that could be translated to an online platform.

As we analyzed the process of connecting Earners with Employers, we realized that this is a very personalized experience, especially considering our target population. It was important to engage directly with Employers to determine how they would welcome a job seeker into their workplace and if they had the capacity to properly on-board and train Earners.

To further assess the feasibility of using online platforms, Drew, the Director of Culinary Programs at Potluck Cafe, signed up for an online app called [Dishwasher Hero](#). This is a Canadian start-up with headquarters in Montreal. Drew signed up for a single shift at a Gastown restaurant on a Sunday in November, with a start time in the middle of the brunch rush. During this shift, Drew identified many issues that could be difficult for members of the target population to navigate:

- **Communication Issues:** No one was expecting Drew and there was no on-boarding procedure. He had to take initiative and know what was expected of a dishwasher.
- **Physically Demanding:** The work was continuous, with a break at the 7-hour mark in an 8-hour shift.
- **No Sense of Community:** The workplace culture back-of-house was quite rough.
- **Payment and no face-to-face support:** There were issues with payment processing, which led to a 3-week delay in depositing wages. There was no option for face-to-face support, and the process was confusing and disorganized.
- **Legal Implications:** Dishwasher Hero does not hire dishwashers; they facilitate the hiring of freelancers by restaurants (part of the gig economy trend). This means no one provides benefits or coordinates insurance/workers compensation for the worker.

The idea for an on-demand labour app similar to Task-Rabbit may decrease transaction costs and speed up the process for Employers to post jobs. However, the impact is in those personal connections. The labour supply coming from our target population isn't a quick fix for labour needs. Time and energy need to be invested to gain Earners' trust and build meaningful opportunities that meet their needs and respect their past experiences.

While developing our analogue matching process, we also learned that phone calls and in-person conversations play a vital role in getting a true sense of the job seeker's abilities and areas of hesitancy, their motivation for completing a task, and readiness to take on that role. We used email and text messages for reminders and for forwarding import-

ant information, but the rapport developed by speaking to someone directly and getting immediate feedback from their questions and responses was an important indicator of how successful the match was going to be. When we spoke to other low-threshold employment initiatives across Canada, from Victoria to Halifax, we received similar thoughts and feedback.

As part of our curated Soft Skills workshop series, we incorporated computer literacy to get a sense of the job seeker's overall savviness with technology. We were happily surprised to see many individuals using mobile phones, checking Facebook on the computer and Googling cute cat memes. Of course, the tech-literacy of all participants was not equal, but a decent amount of job seekers felt comfortable with basic computer skills, such as creating Word documents, emailing and Googling.

However new and trendy the 'gig economy' is, the concept of precarious short-term work has been around much longer. In the DTES, there has always been a market for day-labour, especially in construction. In the past, individuals would know what corner to be at in the morning if they wanted to be picked up by construction teams for day-labour. This work was considered part of the informal economy, as workers were paid in cash at the end of the day. Paying a wage (in cash) on the day worked was important for someone living below the poverty line, as this allowed them to buy food, cigarettes and other essential items. Currently, there is a social enterprise called EMBERS that has found its niche creating formal ties with development companies providing day-labour. This has proven to be quite effective and allows DTES residents to pick up work if they're feeling up for it on the day in question. EMBERS also provide cash advances at the end of the day to help people meet their immediate needs.

Part of the problem with putting these gigs into an app is that it makes them too formal for our target population. Workers would need to wait for payment to be processed, and the fear that their wages would be reported to the government might turn them off of the idea completely. We also found that job seekers, rather than the app developer, would bear the risks associated with employment found through apps. Putting these risks on already vulnerable job seekers would be in conflict with our overall mission. A social enterprise could take on this responsibility, but this would likely be a costly endeavour.



INSIGHTS

ONLINE PLATFORM

Technology could help us to track metrics; send reminders; and manage sustainable relationships with employers, job-seekers and agency partners. It could also assist with payment processing, provided research is conducted on the effect this would have on income assistance.

A personal level of connection is important for this sector, unless we redefine our target population or off-load this personalized approach to Agency partners.

We need to continue to record the process of match-making, which would inform efforts to scale up the operation. This would also help us to test our assumptions regarding the number of employers with jobs that fit our target population.





EMPLOYMENT COACHING

As part of the employment continuum, we work with a diverse population, and each individual has specific needs. During the recruitment, training and matching process, we saw the need for one-on-one support in addition to group workshops and/or direct job opportunities. Knack could meet this need by adding a full-time employment coach to its team.

Several organizations are working to provide one-on-one support. For example, Raincity Housing and Vancouver Coastal Health have partnered to provide Assertive Community Treatment (ACT). This is an evidence-based mental health service delivery model that serves clients living with complex mental illness and substance use disorders. They offer a multi-disciplinary team approach and provide flexible, individualized services to clients with a high staff to client ratio. Potluck has worked with members of the ACT team at Raincity Housing. They have successfully placed clients and retained them as Potluck employees.

One of Potluck's employees has a support team through ACT. The team has permission to communicate directly with the Potluck manager regarding aspects of the employee's life outside of work, which in turn enhances this employee's ability to perform well in the workplace. This transparency leads to deeper understanding, so the manager can better accommodate the employee.

Additionally, the Spencer Creo Foundation provides one-on-one support to individuals. This organization originally partnered with Potluck in 2013 to kick start the Recipes for Success program. They have since grown the program, which is now housed directly under their organization. The Foundation continues to work with many external social enterprises

to create relationships of trust with their employees when challenges come up. Although they are not as comprehensive as ACT, which has health care practitioners on staff, Spencer Creo provides valuable and flexible support and services.

Due to the realities of the current system, many of the job-seekers we engage with have gone without appropriate support in a number of areas. It is important to be able to access and prioritize areas like mental health and stable housing when supporting people during their job searches. We have found that some individuals are desperate to find jobs, but are not necessarily ready to do so, due to instability in their personal lives.

Every job seeker we have met has a different story and is at a different place along the employment continuum. They move at their own speed with different incentives and motivations. To address this challenge, Knack could employ a journey coach to provide extended support to individuals on the path to employment. This would help individuals to strengthen their employability skills and to ensure job retention.

INSIGHTS

In addition to group activities, Earners need one-on-one support. Coaches could be hired to provide emotional support to Earners as they find employment that suits their needs.



CREATING INTERNAL SUPPORTIVE JOBS

Through matching people with different jobs, we found that jobs closest to home were the most successful. For example, Knack and Potluck hired people for one-off jobs or positions in the catering kitchen. In other cases, we had personal connections to external Employers, which gave us a good understanding of how they would be managed and given extra attention. Throughout this matching process, it was difficult to compare and contrast why some matches were successful and some were not. However, a clear predictor of success was the concept of strong relationships and mutual understanding. The idea of building a trusting relationship is vital for both Earners and Employers. Each side of the equation requires a sense of trust to prevent people from putting up emotional shields and to enable effective communication.

There is also a fine balance between creating a trusting job opportunity and empowering people to be resilient when it comes to work and the high degree of change inherent to work. If the Earner gains the important skills of being more confident and capable under stressful situations, then they will have more resilience and be better able to adapt to different work situations. It was challenging to create work environments that were both supportive and somewhat consistent with traditional employment. This process is not black and white, and transitioning an Earner should be done gently, with resilience built over time.

At Potluck, we provide permanent employment, which is distinct from similar social enterprises that use a transitional employment model. With a transitional employment model, the goal is to create employment opportunities that move people along the employment continuum. Our research shows that periods of employment in the transitional model vary from 6 months to 2 years. Social enterprises providing transitional opportunities face the major problem of high turnover. They consistently have to train people, so their enterprise does not reach the level of productivity obtained by competing businesses. It is essential that these social enterprises receive stable, long-term funding to support their programming. Organizations like Potluck could incorporate on-the-job training or practicum placements in external training programs into their programming. This would provide a step between permanent and transitional employment models.

We also captured insights by reaching out to other agencies and social enterprises. Through these conversations, we saw that there is still a lack of technology used for effectively connecting job seekers with employment opportunities. As discussed, low-tech solutions are often more personalized, but are also time and energy intensive. Many organizations also noted that they need better systems for organizing their contacts and employment opportunities. It is difficult to find funding to establish infrastructure and to cover operating costs associated with building out programs so that they are more sustainable and able to withstand non-profit administration and management turnover.

INSIGHTS

CREATING INTERNAL SUPPORTIVE JOBS

Training and creating transitional employment opportunities comes at a cost to the social enterprise.

Relationship-building is essential for developing supportive employment opportunities.

We experienced tension between providing comfortable employment opportunities and creating resiliency within the Earner to manage change.

There is a lack of back-end business software used in social enterprises to assist growth and maintain accuracy in operational activities (e.g. HR).

Future Opportunities

We are currently at a crossroads and determining where to go next with Knack. This was one of the main reasons we decided to write this report. We wanted to reflect and record our lessons learned, disseminate the knowledge we have gained and consult with community before taking our next steps!

We have tested out concepts and ideas. We have had many successes and some failures. We have acknowledged the tension associated with defining the problem we aimed to tackle and which affected our ability to confidently move ahead with ideas.

In addition to the insights discussed throughout this report, we have identified several contextual and environmental shifts that should be considered in future planning.

Locally...

Potluck Cafe Society recently changed leadership by hiring a new Executive Director. We are doing a bit of internal reorganization and so are still in a certain amount of flux. The initial concept for Knack originated with the previous Potluck leadership and will need to be re-examined based on the priorities and vision of the new leadership.

The social hiring movement is growing at both a local and national level. The City of Vancouver recently awarded a contract to EMBERS to operate a Low-Threshold Employment Resource Hub, which is expected to open its doors in February 2018. There is a strong group of social enterprises in the DTES community providing formal and informal opportunities along the employment continuum. Some of the newest emerging social enterprises include Bridge2Work and Work

With Us, which both utilize a temp agency format to connect job seekers with employment. This wide range of employment initiatives is essential to meet the diverse needs of our community. There is no one-size-fits-all solution or intervention for addressing this complex problem. Where does Knack fit in the broader employment landscape?

As a systems-level agent of change...

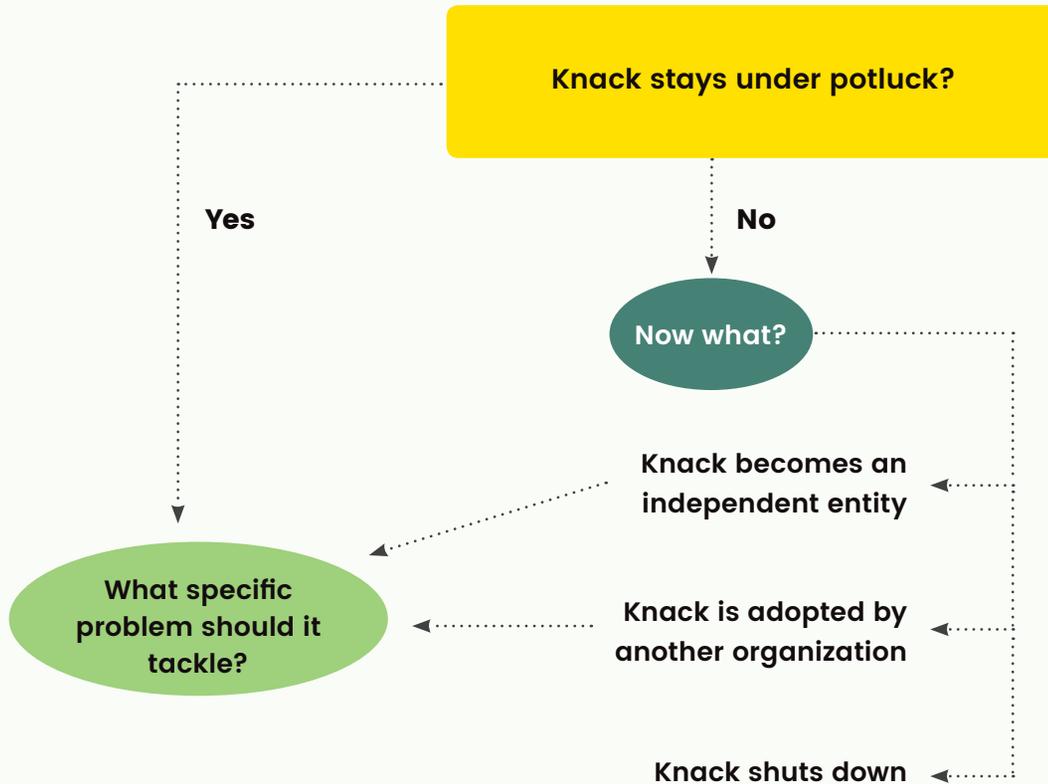
With so many diverse employment initiatives, there is a need to coordinate specific industry pipeline skills and standardize a Soft Skills vetting process. Knack could take on these projects. We could bring together key players to create more effective partnerships between Employers and Agencies. Using this experience, we could advocate at a systems-level to government and larger institutions to enable more social hiring activities.

Recipes for Success was a program originally housed at Potluck, but which has since moved to the Spencer Creo Foundation, another like-minded, DTES-focused organization. The move was successful, as the program now has more resources and more capacity to grow the program in a sustainable manner. Does Knack, which has been incubated at Potluck, similarly need to step out of its comfortable 'nest' for its next growth phase?

As a 'social hiring' leader at the front-lines...

Potluck is on the verge of significant growth, both with the catering company and with partner projects. Knack could use this opportunity to create a pilot project surrounding this next stage of training and hiring. The range of activities that

support our target population could expand, and we could allocate capacity to sharing our experiences with other businesses as a blueprint. By actively hiring, training and defining what success is for our team, we could make the changes required to accommodate the diverse abilities of our Earners. We would be able to draw from our experiences running training sessions to create a stronger program. We would have a better idea of the jobs available and the type of people who would be a good fit for the training. We could communicate this to Earners, rather than giving them a vague value proposition.



We would position our pipeline development for the food-processing industry. Using the lessons learned from Knack, we could build a clear pipeline for job seekers to open positions and assist the upskilling of kitchen staff to enable them to move to more traditional employment when they're ready. With this growth, Knack could work with a smaller range of stakeholders, but have more involvement with our target population throughout their journey into supportive employment and potentially onto traditional employment.

Going further...

The challenge we face is picking a specific problem to tackle within this very complex system surrounding employment. We need to take a moment to re-define the problem we aim to address, as well as the criteria that constrain and guide our work. We need to work on a single priority, rather than the multiple priorities (and variables) that we have been navigating.

This report shows the wide scope of our research and activities in the employment continuum. With our current findings, we are looking to re-focus our attention and limited resources to effectively make change. We are connected to many inspiring leaders in the field and hope that this report provides a channel to gain feedback and mentorship as we move forward.

Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms

Term	Refers to
Downtown Eastside (DTES)	Inner-city community in Vancouver with a diverse and dense population of low-income individuals and families.
The Low-Barrier Income Generation Hub at the Lux (Recently named EMBERS Eastside Works)	A new site at 57 East Hastings Street initiated by the City of Vancouver to create a safe and welcoming space that fills the current employment gap in the DTES managed by Johanna Li at EMBERS.
Barriers to Employment	Factors limiting one’s ability to secure employment. Barriers to employment are unique to the individual and often complex. They include but are not limited to: physical and mental health, lack of education and training opportunities, taking care of loved ones (child care, seniors care), gap in employment history, criminal record, unstable housing, age, drug and/or alcohol abuse, limited language proficiency, generational trauma, entrenched poverty and employer bias. People may experience these barriers for short or longer periods of time, but they do not define the individual.
Target Population	Individuals who are unemployed or underemployed, experiencing barriers to employment. While many employment initiatives focus on specific groups (e.g. youth, aboriginals and women), we intentionally leave our criteria open and do not require official verification (can be self-described as someone seeking additional support).
Digital Badges	Digital “micro-credentials” that represent skills, interests, and achievements earned by an individual through specific projects, programs, courses, or other activities. Research shows that badges help recognize individuals for their skills and accomplishments, as well as motivating them to accomplish more and aid in navigation through different opportunities.

Employers	Business owners and/or hiring managers who understand Knack's commitment to establishing a supportive work environment for an eligible employee (i.e. job creation for individuals facing barriers to employment).
Low-Threshold Employment	Accessible, legal income generating opportunities that accommodate health and social service use (e.g. addictions treatment enrolment) and periodic or episodic absences. Commonly flexible, task-based work.
Unconventional Training	The training and workshop series available through agencies and institutions that might not be accredited education centres, but which build skills for the target population.
Income-generation continuum	See Figure 1. Also, described as the employment continuum.
Job Carving	Job carving involves the melding of job seeker and employer needs through systematic workplace analysis and person-centered career planning. Carving is based on the concept of using a person's unique contributions and matching those to an employment setting. ¹
Task-based work	"One of the most exciting options looming on the work horizon is the concept of switching to "task-based" rather than "time-based" arrangements. The essence of this approach is to assign employees specific tasks, and require them to put in only as much time as it actually takes to get the work done." ²
Social Procurement	"Social procurement can be understood as the use of purchasing power to create social value. In the case of public sector purchasing, social procurement involves the utilisation of procurement strategies to support social policy objectives." ³
Traditional Employment	Full-time, permanent employment consisting more than 30 hours per week.

¹ http://www.griffinhammis.com/images/Employment_SpecialistsA.pdf

² <https://hbr.org/2007/03/think-task-not-time>

³ https://eprints.qut.edu.au/29060/1/Barraket_and_Weissmann_2009_Working_Paper_No_48_Final.pdf



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