

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing a yellow headband and glasses, is focused on sewing at a white sewing machine. She is wearing a bright yellow t-shirt. In the background, a rack holds several pairs of scissors. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a clean, professional workshop environment.

SEWN GOODS SECTOR FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Created by: EcoEquitable with support from the Ottawa Employment Hub - October 2018





SEWN GOODS SECTOR FOCUS GROUP REPORT

2018

Introduction

A series of Focus Groups were conducted with small groups of:

1. Sewn Goods Sector employers and people working in the sector as well as
2. job seekers who were actively looking for work in this sector.

Focus groups were held at EcoEquitable and at CollabSpace in the west of Ottawa.

The focus groups were divided into Employer and Job Seeker groups.

Numbers of participants were kept deliberately small to allow for meaningful discussion and to ensure all participants had an opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions.

A total of 14 employers and 9 employees/job seekers participated in the focus groups.

The facilitated discussions focused on five questions that both groups responded to based on their own experience within the Capital Region Sewn Goods Sector. Using similar questions with both the Employer and Employee/Job Seekers allowed us to gain a better understanding of the labour market issues and challenges from both perspectives. (Session plans for both focus groups are included as appendices.)

Overview of the Sewn Goods Sector in Canada

The former business model of creating a product in large quantities and then trying to sell it is no longer relevant. That model has been commoditized and dominated by low-cost overseas manufacturers. The portion of the textile and apparel sector that will grow in Canada will be in partnership with ethical purchasers and with small-scale businesses that cater to specialty markets.

The Conference Board of Canada 2015 Industry Profile released a short-term forecast of healthy production and improving profits. The long-term picture is less complimentary, but this mostly speaks to large producers making commoditized products such as Gildan's t-shirts moving overseas to countries with lower labour costs and reduced environmental regulation.

In 2017, the BC Apparel Sector Labour Market Partnership (SLMP) stated: *"The premium and performance apparel sector in BC is growing at exponential rates. Not counting those employed in retail positions, apparel businesses in British Columbia are reporting almost 9,000 anticipated vacancies by 2025."* There is no comparative data for Ontario, as we do not have a similar Apparel Sector Labour Market organization.

"Getting the skilled people, acquiring the skills, right down to the mismatch geographically, and getting the right people at the right moment are all at the top of the chart," said Al Diggins, the president and general manager of Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium (EMC), based in Owen Sound, Ontario. EMC is a not-for-profit organization helps manufacturers compete globally by providing a range of educational opportunities, services and training programs.

The Manufacturers' Outlook 2017 (published by PLANT, Advanced Canadian Manufacturing) polled hundreds of manufacturing leaders and found that 29% cited a skills gap in production/production support and 27% cited a skills gap in general labour. Further, skills are certainly a concern for those participating in the EMC Manufacturing GPS initiative, a searchable system that provides in-depth labour market data to manufacturers.

These are all issues that EcoEquitable and our employment partners are looking to address.

Focus Group Responses

TYPES OF JOBS: Employers were asked to list the types of jobs they had available (or existed in their business) and the training/experience they required. Job Seekers were asked to list the types of jobs they were looking for and the experience they had.

Most employers were willing to provide some training on the job but required job seekers

EMPLOYERS		JOB SEEKERS	
TYPES OF JOBS	TRAINING/EXPERIENCE REQUIRED	TYPES OF JOBS	EXISTING TRAINING/EXPERIENCE
Seamstress/Sewers Production Assistants Sample makers Sewing instructors (for courses some employers offered)	Sewing Experience (different types)* Industrial Garment Construction* Portfolio of Sewing samples (+ finished garments) Knowledge of equipment/types of fabric Speed and efficiency	Alterations	Some work experience and courses at EcoEquitable Customer Service
Pattern Maker	Patternmaking & Adjustment	Pattern Making	Ability to take proper measurements EcoEquitable course
Supervisors	Ability to train others	Self-Employed/ Subcontractor	Some industrial machine experience Previously self-employed in similar field
Design Assistants	Most of the same skills listed for sewers and patternmakers	Fashion Designer	Using computers
Mechanic/Technician* (badly needed as local ones are retiring)	Knowledge of industrial sewing machine repair and maintenance	Museum work (textiles/clothing collections)	No experience just an interest
Customer Service Sales Representatives Marketing	No special training required Prior experience	Fashion Merchandiser	No experience just an interest
CAD/Graphic Design	Specialized training		
Cutters	Learn "on the job" or previous experience		
Quality Control/Quality Assurance			
Packaging/Shipping/ Inventory management			

to already have a certain level of technical skills (and many required years of previous experience). Most available jobs were full time although there were also part time opportunities and opportunities to work as sub-contractors. Some employers were only able to offer employment during their peak production times and had to lay off workers when there was less production work required (not able to offer stable work and this led to some employers losing good workers to other manufacturers that could offer year round employment). Overall, nearly every employer said the lack of skilled labour has cost them opportunities and potential profits.

On the job seekers side, most were looking for sewing work but lacked industrial experience. Many had taken courses at EcoEquitable but did not have industry experience that limited the types of jobs for which they could apply. Many had aspirations for (or an interest in) other types of jobs (Fashion Designer, Fashion Merchandiser, Museum work with textiles) but they could not access this type of training. They were aware of one school in Ottawa that offered Fashion Design training but they had heard negative things about the school. Some who had already found employment in the sector spoke of poor working conditions in some places where they worked (mostly in terms of bosses with unfair expectations, unwilling to train but expecting high quality fast work from inexperienced workers). Many job seekers seemed unaware of all the types of sewing-related jobs available in the industry. Overall, the feeling among job seekers was that they were disadvantaged due to lack of industrial experience and that they felt they lacked opportunities to gain this type of experience.



EXPERIENCE WITH RECRUITMENT/JOB SEEKING TOOLS AND METHODS: Employers were asked to list the recruitment tools and/or methods they have used and which had been effective (yielded positive results) or ineffective (negative results). Job seekers were asked to list the tools and methods they have tried when seeking employment in the sewn goods sector and rate their effectiveness similarly.

EMPLOYERS		JOB SEEKERS	
EFFECTIVE POSITIVE RESULTS	NOT EFFECTIVE NEGATIVE RESULTS	EFFECTIVE POSITIVE RESULTS	NOT EFFECTIVE NEGATIVE RESULTS
Indeed.ca Word of mouth/Referrals EcoEquitable Employee recruiting client or friend Poster in store Emailing clients Clientele in store Volunteers/internships Walk In Instagram Cultural Associations Cultural Social Groups March of Dimes	Indeed.ca Word of Mouth Kijiji Instagram Charity Village LinkedIn Emploi Quebec	Word of mouth	Indeed.ca Internet searches Kijiji Networking
Employment Ontario Make Sew Create (Some had positive experience and some negative experiences)			

For employers, what made job-posting on sites such as Indeed, Kijiji or even using provincial employment services ineffective was the job seekers not reading the posting carefully (overlooking or ignoring details that would have told them they were not suited for the position) and receiving numerous applications from job seekers with completely un-related skills. A common problem was receiving applications/inquiries from job seekers who had not researched their companies and lacked knowledge of what they did or manufactured (poor understanding of the nature of the job). Another common problem was job seekers who had low skills or had overstated (knowingly or unknowingly) their skill level. Language was also identified as a problem with job seekers being unable to communicate effectively in the language of the workplace (English or French). Some had the experience of offering to interview a candidate and the person failed to show up. A few employers had employed workers who failed to perform (for various reasons: poor work ethic, lateness/absenteeism, low skills or speed) and had to let them go.

The methods and tools that employers found effective seemed to be accessing or communicating with their networks to make them aware of the existing opportunities and getting referrals from trusted sources (EcoEquitable, employees, clients). Some employers had positive experiences reaching out to cultural groups and associations, noting that newcomers to Canada are more likely to possess prior industrial sewing experience. Many also indicated that volunteers, interns and co-op students went on to become effective and valued employees.

The Employees and Job Seekers reported success only with word of mouth referrals. Online searches did not show many local work opportunities. Some opportunities that were available were in locations they could not access using public transportation. They did not seem to be aware of the Sewn Goods Sector businesses in the area (many were newcomers to Canada) so they were not able to contact these potential employers directly. They also did not seem to be aware of the range of sewing related jobs that exist in the industry. (When asked to list the types of jobs in sewn goods manufacturing, they could name very few.) Many identified that their lack of language skills was a barrier to employment. Overall, the job seekers felt frustrated with their perceived lack of job opportunities in the area.



MOST DESIRABLE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ATTITUDES: Employers were asked to list the most desirable knowledge, skills and attitudes they seek in employees. Job seekers were asked to list what they perceived to be the most important knowledge, skills and attitudes that are required.

EMPLOYERS	JOB SEEKERS
KNOWLEDGE	
Machine operation/Daily maintenance Work experience How to use different machines Regulations (re: wages) Specific fabrics (types and how to sew them)	Previous experience How to use cover stitch machine
SKILLS	
Use of different types of industrial machines Stamina (physically able to do the work) Precision – Professional Finishing Various fabrics (ability to sew) Non-industrial machines Speed Efficiency Creativity Eye for quality	Sewing speed Use of industrial machines
ATTITUDES	
Following Instructions Asking Questions Taking Feedback Flexibility Independent Focus Cultural Adaptability Reliable Accountable Problem solving Communication Confidence Collaborative Non-competitive Initiative	Friendly Personality Easy-Going Responsible Organized

The results of this exercise revealed that while employers were very clear about what they required from a potential employee, job seekers seemed very unaware of all the attitudes or “soft skills” that they may already possess that are desirable to employers. It also revealed the importance of these soft skills to employers (longest of all three lists).

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS: Employers were asked to list the challenges and barriers that they experienced when trying to recruit skilled workers. Job seekers were asked to list the challenges and barriers they experienced when trying to find work in the sewn goods sector.

EMPLOYERS	JOB SEEKERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Travel to workplace (distance from employees' homes – not accessible by public transit) Language barriers Misrepresentation of skills Wages Long learning curve Finding employees (job pool) Workers not adhering to company culture Stamina/inability to perform physical work Factory work seen as less desirable (less creative) than fashion design Seasonal continuity/work wage stability Retaining employees No young people with the skills required (older skilled workers becoming physically less able or retiring) Not finding workers who are reliable or take accountability for their actions (or inaction) Lack of attention to detail Unaware of Canadian workplace norms/expectations/standards Cultural differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not enough years of experience Language barriers Not bilingual Location (transportation) Not fast enough at sewing Employers' high expectations Employers' unwilling to, or don't, provide proper training Don't know many sewing-related companies that exist in the area No Canadian work experience No steady work available Don't know where to look for work

The responses to this question that were provided by both employers and job seekers were the most similar out of all the questions asked during the sessions. This seems to indicate that the same barriers exist for both parties.



ADDITIONAL SUPPORT THAT WOULD HELP: Both employers and job seekers were asked to list/describe the type of support that would help with their recruitment/job seeking efforts.

EMPLOYERS	JOB SEEKERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Career Fair Database of job seekers with targeted skills specified (searchable by skills/experience) Establishing links with educational institutions (that teach sewing-related programs) Establishing links with newcomer/immigrant welcoming organizations Co-op placement or internship programs Organizing field trips to workplaces Pre-screening/skill testing service Referrals Having a "One Stop" recruitment tool Temporary/Permanent job placements Work Share situations where employees could be seconded to other employers when work is unavailable at their workplace but other workplaces are very busy A searchable skills/experience-based database of potential employees Time-based scheduling (similar to work share opportunity) using a digitally accessible shared calendar between employers Job Posting Board Development of local Sewn Goods Sector Association to meet regularly Wage Subsidy programs/grants Ongoing relationship with EcoEquitable Rotating internship (intern works at different employers for fixed time periods to gain wider experience) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More opportunities to practice on industrial machines Career Fair/Face-to-face networking opportunities Support to learn a second language Learning sewing terminology More job offers on the internet Database of student profiles Learning more alteration skills in Sewing For Jobs curriculum Database of Employers/Job opportunities Job Search Club

Of all the questions asked, the discussion on the topic of additional support required was the liveliest and yielded the most suggestions. It was clear that both parties need additional support and desperately wanted additional support. Both parties made many excellent and achievable suggestions.

Conclusion/Recommendations:

Recruitment and job searching is challenging for both groups. While some have success with certain recruitment tools/methods, others have found the same tools/methods ineffective. A common tool (such as a searchable, database of workers and job opportunities) would be extremely beneficial to both parties. There are jobs available in the Capital Region Sewn Goods Sector but employers struggle to find suitable workers to fill these positions and some workers who might be suitable are unaware of these opportunities. EcoEquitable seems to be the common link between these two groups and a trusted source of referrals. With additional support, EcoEquitable could more effectively connect employers with appropriate job seekers.

In terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, it was clear that employers have very specific expectations in terms of technical knowledge and skills, as well as the attitudes or “soft skills” that are essential to succeeding in their workplaces. Job seekers seemed unaware of many of these expectations and struggled to articulate what they thought they had to offer potential employers. It would be beneficial for job seekers to have more exposure and better understanding of Sewn Goods workplaces (perhaps through field trips or internships/co-ops, guest speakers). Additionally, more emphasis could be placed on soft skills within EcoEquitable’s Sewing for Jobs training programs.

RECOMMENDATION #1: Develop a “soft skills” training program that could be either integrated into the Sewing for Jobs program or perhaps it could be a stand-alone course for job seekers looking to enter the Sewn Goods Sector.

The challenges and barriers both employers and job seekers face are very similar. Some of these are beyond the scope of what EcoEquitable can solve (such as accessibility by public transport). Others seem to reflect the challenges overall in the Sewn Goods industry (aging skilled workforce, lack of access to younger experienced skilled workers). Some of the suggestions that came out of the Focus Groups have already been put into place. For example, immediately after our Employer Focus Group at Collabspace, Taggerwear owner Susan Trott established a Facebook group for fellow employers in the sector called OTTAWA INDUSTRIAL SEWING.

RECOMMENDATION #2: These are challenges that can only be overcome by the local players in the Sewn Goods sector working together to bring about change on a larger scale. The OTTAWA INDUSTRIAL SEWING facebook page was a great start in terms of connecting the local stakeholders. EcoEquitable can encourage more employers to join and actively contribute to the page. Some employers have suggested a regular meeting (perhaps with different companies hosting the meeting each time so there could be an opportunity to tour their workplace and become more familiar with each others’ businesses and products).

EcoEquitable has already adjusted our Sewing for Jobs curriculum to include more opportunities for students to gain experience and practice on industrial machines and English language training is being provided for Sewing for Jobs students.

RECOMMENDATION #3: It is clear that our Sewing for Jobs students require more industrial experience. Learning to sew is one thing, but learning to sew for industry can be quite different. It takes a while to become familiar with the way industrial machines work and even more time to be able to sew with the speed, precision and confidence required by industry. EcoEquitable must find a way to provide students with more time to learn industrial techniques and more access to industrial machines with which to be able to practice. This could be done in partnership with employers if they were willing to provide opportunities for students through paid coop placements. It is likely some employers would be open to this type of partnership – especially if we were able to provide them with a wage subsidy during the time the student is placed with them.

It may also be necessary to add a third component to the Sewing for Jobs programs. Currently we offer Beginner and Advanced but perhaps a more intensive Industrial Sewing for Jobs could be developed and offered that focuses exclusively on developing the sewing skills and competencies needed by industry. If this curriculum were to be developed, it would be important to have local industry representatives advising on the content.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

Some of the other suggestions could be achievable if more funding were available; for example, to establish online tools for recruitment/job share opportunities, or to put on events such as job fairs, field trips to employers workplaces, internships/co-ops, etc. Many of these are currently beyond the scope of what EcoEquitable can provide given current funding and staffing levels.



APPENDIX A: EMPLOYERS SESSION

TIME	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
10 min	Welcome & Introductions – Facilitators welcome participants and thank them for their participation, introduce themselves, ask participants to introduce themselves
10 min	Brief introduction about EcoEquitable and overall goals of this project Tips/Guidelines for effective and equitable participation (Ground Rules) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect every speaker by paying attention to what they have to say and not interrupting 2. Keep cell phones on silent and avoid texting or checking messages during the session 3. Off-topic items will be put into “Parking Lot” for discussion later (time permitting)
20 min	Put up two flipchart papers side-by-side <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the participants to LIST THE TYPES OF SEWING-RELATED JOBS AVAILABLE in their business on the first paper • Ask the participants to LIST THE REQUIRED TRAINING/EXPERIENCE NEEDED FOR THE JOBS LISTED • Discuss whether current local training is sufficient to meet the needs of these positions and, if not, where are the gaps
20 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pass out Post-It notes • Ask the participants to LIST THE RECRUITMENT TOOLS/METHODS THEY HAVE USED in the past or currently use to recruit staff • Put up a flipchart paper with two columns “EFFECTIVE/POSITIVE RESULTS” and “NOT EFFECTIVE/NEGATIVE RESULTS” • Ask the participants to put their Post-It notes under the appropriate category according to their experience • Discuss what made some positive and others negative
30 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put up three flipchart papers on separate walls • One of the following questions on each: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE OR HAVE YOU FACED WHEN TRYING TO RECRUIT SUITABLE EMPLOYEES TO FILL SEWING-RELATED POSITIONS? - WHAT (IF ANY) ADDITIONAL SUPPORT WOULD HELP YOUR BUSINESS WITH RECRUITMENT EFFORTS? • LIST THE MOST IMPORTANT/DESIRABLE KNOWLEDGE/SKILLS AND/OR ATTITUDES YOU SEEK IN EMPLOYEES? • Divide the group into three and give them 5-8 minutes to discuss and record their thoughts on each of the flip chart papers; when going to a page that already has items listed, circle those that your group agrees with • Ask a representative from each group to summarize the points listed on the flipchart paper • Discuss similarities and differences
30 min	Discussion/Reflection/Next Steps – Discuss any additional ideas/parking lot items. Ask for key takeaways from each participant. Explain what will be done with the information provided and what they can expect going forward.

APPENDIX B: EMPLOYEE/JOB SEEKERS SESSION

TIME	ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION
10 min	Welcome & Introductions – Facilitators welcome participants and thank them for their participation, introduce themselves, ask participants to introduce themselves.
10 min	Brief introduction about EcoEquitable and overall goals of this project – Tips/Guidelines for effective and equitable participation (Ground Rules) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect every speaker by paying attention to what they have to say and not interrupting 2. Keep cell phones on silent and avoid texting or checking messages during the session 3. Off-topic items will be put into “Parking Lot” for discussion later (time permitting)
20 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put up two flipchart papers side-by-side • Ask the participants to LIST THE TYPES OF SEWING-RELATED JOBS THEY DO OR ARE SEEKING (include those they have done in the past) • Ask the participants to LIST THE TRAINING/EXPERIENCE THEY HAD THAT MADE THEM SUITABLE CANDIDATES FOR THE JOBS LISTED • Discuss whether current local training is sufficient to meet the needs of these positions and, if not, where are the gaps
20 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pass out Post-It notes • Ask the participants to LIST THE RECRUITMENT TOOLS/METHODS THEY HAVE USED in the past or currently use to look for sewing-related employment. • Put up a flipchart paper with two columns “EFFECTIVE/POSITIVE RESULTS” and “NOT EFFECTIVE/NEGATIVE RESULTS” • Ask the participants to put their Post-It notes under the appropriate category according to their experience • Discuss what made some positive and others negative
30 min	Activity – Graffiti Wall <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Put up three flipchart papers on separate walls - One of the following questions on each: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WHAT CHALLENGES/BARRIERS DO YOU FACE OR HAVE YOU FACED WHEN TRYING TO ACCESS SUITABLE EMPLOYMENT IN SEWING-RELATED POSITIONS? • WHAT (IF ANY) ADDITIONAL SUPPORT WOULD HELP (OR WOULD HAVE HELPED YOU WITH JOB SEARCH?) • LIST WHAT YOU THINK THE MOST IMPORTANT/DESIRABLE KNOWLEDGE/SKILLS AND/OR ATTITUDES EMPLOYEES IN SEWING RELATED JOBS SHOULD HAVE? - Divide the group into three and give them 5-8 minutes to discuss and record their thoughts on each of the flip chart papers; when going to a page that already has items listed, circle those that your group agrees with - Ask a representative from each group to summarize the points listed on their flip chart paper - Discuss similarities and differences
15 min	Discussion/Reflection/Next Steps – Discuss any additional ideas/parking lot items. Ask for key takeaways from each participant. Explain what will be done with the information provided and what they can expect going forward

SEWN GOODS SECTOR FOCUS GROUP REPORT

404 McArthur Avenue
Suite 200
Heartwood House
Ottawa, Ontario K1K 1G8
(613) 562-1739
info@ecoequitable.ca
ecoequitable.ca