



## **National Connector Program Learning Exchange Summary Document**

*What was said, what was learned, and what was discussed.*

The 2023 Learning Exchange was two days of sharing best practices, lessons learned, challenges and successes. This document is intended to be a summary of all discussions, panels, and presentations. Further toolkits and documents will be created from the outcomes discussed at the conference.

### **Panel #1: Rural Representation and the Connector Program**

#### **Question #1: How do you cover such a large area effectively?**

- In Western REN, there are locations and offices in many of the communities, as the team can work from anywhere in the region, and board members are from communities around the area.
- In MusicNL, they partner with organizations in many communities to have a presence there and use online communication platforms to increase their reach. They also have a virtual office that anyone can come into.
- In Saskatchewan they also partner with organizations in the communities, and ensure they are aware of the programs CECS offers. They also work specifically with employers that have a strong rural focus and use these relationships to cover larger areas.

#### **Question #2: What activities help to promote your coverage of the areas, and how do you run these activities?**

- Saskatchewan ran a pilot “Rural Sask. Work. Live. Thrive” job fair where communities were invited to give a sales pitch about their areas, and what makes them a good place to live. Participants came into the fair in cohorts and had to watch the presentations before heading into the fair, which had employers, municipalities and communities, and services separated into areas of the province. This way, participants could see what each area offered them, and that the rural areas are places where they can thrive. There are close to 18 000 jobs open in Saskatchewan right now, and most of them are in the rural areas, not in the big cities of Regina and Saskatoon.
- MusicNL focuses on sponsoring events across the province to support different organizations and musicians working in the various areas of the province. This helps them create partnerships, further their brand across the province, and increase awareness of their programs.
- Western REN holds events in all of the communities and partners with different organizations and businesses in each area to support them and increase awareness. They try to have different types of events, and hold them at different times, so they are accessible to as many people as possible. They also always

have people leave with something tangible – a LinkedIn head shot, information from a lunch and learn, a workbook etc.

\*Some notes from this question include

- personal touches, including individual invitations are important to get people to come to events.
- Recruitment of people to your organization might also need an on the ground approach – go to grocery stores, cultural organizations, places of worship and talk to people about your services.

**Question #3: What are the biggest challenges you face covering such a large area?**

- Lack of awareness of the program, and sometimes the organization is very difficult to overcome across such a wide area.
- The cost of covering a large space is also prohibitive. MusicNL is exploring Social Enterprise options so they can become more self-sufficient to fund their programs.
- There seems to be a misunderstanding of what the program is, or what exactly it intends to accomplish. People, especially in rural areas might not understand the need/beauty of networking because they live in a place with such a small population.
- Getting the number of volunteers necessary to run the program is difficult across such a large space.

**Question #4: What changes the lack of awareness?**

- Creating flyers and one-pagers about the program can help with the lack of awareness and help to manage the misunderstandings around the program.
- Volunteers also help to change the lack of awareness – they are your biggest champions.
- Activities create awareness – Saskatchewan has said that the Rural Job Fair they put on last year was a game changer for their entire organization, and certainly the Connector Program.
- Reminding other organizations that helping community members is not a competition, and that we are a value-add program. We don't take clients away; we simply add value to their experience.

**Comments and Additions from the Panel**

- Showing people, the rural areas of all provinces is important – they can't make the decision to move there if they can't find any information about a place. We need to be able to show communities to people so they understand how one lives there, what the community feels like, and what it's like to live there from the perspective of a local.
  - This brought about an idea for virtual tours of communities. Something we will work on in the future.
- We also discussed what event people would like to **do if money was no object**. If you could plan any event for the program – what would you plan?

## **Roundtable Discussion #1: Employment**

We held three roundtable discussions. The first focused on employment. This overview includes the questions and discussions at the tables.

### **Question #1 How can the Connector Program fit into local job/employment recruitment strategies?**

- We can help to refine resumes, work on interview strategies, and handpick applicants for positions with our partner organizations and businesses.
- We can define employment expectations for newcomers – such as work culture, duties for a given industry, what to expect from an interview etc. as well as expectations of the current job market, and employee and employer expectations so Connectees are set up for success.
- Ensuring we use a human-centred approach, so Connectees feel valued and respected.
- Networking might be a foreign concept to Connectees – so we need to share the importance, value, and concept of it as well as help them begin to network in the community.
- Offer opportunities for Work-Integrated Learning (apprenticeships, volunteering, job shadowing etc) to increase Connectees knowledge of the positions and industries, increases their productivity and enjoyment of their positions.
- We can help to bridge the gap between the job market and Connectee's education – one way is to ensure they are qualified before introducing them to Connectors or job opportunities.

### **Question #2 Do we, as Connector Coordinators, have a role to play to increase diversity in local organizations? How?**

- We are funded by IRCC, so yes, this is absolutely in our mandate. It's a byproduct of the work we do.
- We have an obligation to do this as a member of the community.
- In rural areas, we can introduce this concept and its importance to businesses.
- We understand our Connectees skills sets and education, and we can help showcase the value their transferrable skills and international education can bring to an organization.
- We can help organizations overcome the fear of the unknown and increase their confidence in hiring diverse people.
- We can help increase cultural awareness in organizations.
- There is a business case for a diverse workplace – it increases productivity and revenues.
- You must live DEI as an organization, you cannot just promote it.
- We can also educate employers about credential recognition.
- We can leverage Connectors to be inclusive in their hiring practices.
- Success stories can really help all the above happen.
- NCP could put together cultural bias/sensitivity documents/workshops so numerous organizations could take part.
- We could encourage training and let businesses know about opportunities.

\*\*But businesses also need to recognize they need training – should we perform diagnostics in our areas?

\*\*Small to medium sized communities need to be the focus especially in these conversations.

- Connector Program organizations could look into Chamber Code programs, where they might give out designations to diverse employers in the program area.
- Share the Employer Handbook created by the Immigrant Employment Councils with businesses.

### **Question #3 How does Remote work fit into the Connector Program?**

- It is hard to make this a value proposition to Connectors and Connectees, and it depends on the company.
- Remote connections can be easier, but it's hard to make this happen.
- Our funding might constrain our work on this – we need to support local companies.
- Collaboration among us would be key – sharing opportunities, connectors, jobs etc.
- The challenge is also – how many jobs are actually remote? And benefits and technology usually depend on the employer.
- Does it fit with our program at all? How can you develop relationships virtually?
- Many clients have the tools to work remotely, but some might not.
- This might be especially beneficial for rural communities, but how might it be received by smaller businesses in those communities?
- Jurisdictions are fighting for people – so they might not want to share people (especially NB and ON).
- Community leaders might sway businesses in some communities against Remote work.

### **Question #4 What can be done with businesses to help pave the way to employment for Connectees?**

- Support Connectees with programs that support the immigration process – like PR or housing so businesses don't have to.
- Build credibility with employers so they trust the Connector Program referrals.
  - USE SUCCESS STORIES
- Learn what businesses need/want/desire from Connectees – but also on resumes – you may want to complete a survey?
- Meet with sponsor/partner businesses to ask where their gaps are, and how you can fill them.
- Teach businesses about the newcomer experience so they may have more empathy.

## **Presentation #1: Relationship Management**

Robyn and Alida presented on the importance of Relationship Management and gave suggestions and ideas for how best to improve, grow and strengthen relationships you have with other organizations, businesses, and community partners.

The slides for the presentation, along with the notes, [can be found here](#).

## **Panel #2: Coordinator Best Practices**

### **Question #1: What practices do you use to help Connectees find success?**

- Aman provides support with LinkedIn and pushes for strong pitches and strong resumes. He knows it's hard for newcomers to connect with the right people at the right time and the right place, and strives to connect with them behind their resume, using a human centred approach. He works to inspire Connectees with success stories to motivate them. He wants them to understand that good things take time, and that networking is crucial.
- Nathan provides labour market information and helps Connectees understand where the opportunities are, private versus public roles and hiring practises, where networking works, and might not, how to market yourself, and where to find resources for the job search – including job postings and where to find help in certain industries.
- Marie-Line focuses on being on a personal level with her Connectees, making sure she understands them, what their struggles are, and how she might be able to point them in the right direction for other services. She also focuses on finding a good fit with her Connectors for all her Connectees.

### **Question #2: What sort of day-to-day operations and systems do you use to stay organized?**

- Nathan uses Outlook to stay organized, because the sheer number of applicants can be challenging to organize on a day-to-day basis. He tries to look for and prepare for anything that might cause a backlog (out of the ordinary background/resume for example).
- Marie-Line organizes Connectees into categories and industries and has a very visual way of organizing them (sheets of paper and post its on her wall). She uses Calendly for scheduling, but only opens the Calendly one month at a time. She has templates on hand to send out to her Connectees, so she doesn't spend time writing the same email over and over.
- Aman uses ready made templates as well, and uses a colour coded excel sheet and Gmail to organize information and ensure no Connectee gets lost. Aman suggested if Connectee misses a meeting (and doesn't tell him), he codes them in red, so that he can follow up on time management and the importance of making appointments in the Canadian context.

\*\* It is important to note that Connectors also play a role in helping Connectees understand the Canadian workplace context such as scheduling appointments and cancelling meetings in a proper way.

### **Question #3: How do you manage your time each week?**

- Marie-Line has her week planned out ahead of time. She meets with Connectees only on Tuesdays and plans for the week ahead every Thursday. The rest of the time is spent connecting Connectees, planning events, and other tasks required for the position.
- Aman has two slots to meet with Connectees every day. He tries to ensure the connection is made by the end of the day. He then takes the rest of the day to plan activities, events, and other duties for his other tasks.
- A question was asked about the number of connections made per week. Aman meets with around 8-12 per week, and has templates ready for every email, so he does not spend time writing emails. Marie-Line also meets with roughly 8-10 per week, and Nathan, with 4 members on his team, meets with no more than 2 per day, or 5-10 per week.
- Another question specifically asked of Nathan, was do you divide different sectors for different coordinators. Nathan said he used to, but then when a team member left, all that knowledge also left. So now, Connectees are divided equally across the team. He also counts jobs as part of the funding, and these are counted by him, on LinkedIn once per quarter. He only counts jobs where people's experience and education are commensurate with the position they have received.
- Another question was how do we make our social media platforms more effective? The NCP Social Media Toolkit was mentioned, which can be found on the portal. Nathan mentioned the use of HubSpot by Halifax Partnership, and Ignite Fredericton agreed with this as a powerful tool. LinkedIn is also a great tool and is essential for the Halifax team. It is important to know what platform is popular within the community, and what demographic or audience you want to reach out to.
- Someone asked if anyone had used AI to create content for social media. It was suggested to use it for idea generation, but you need a person to monitor information and create the posts.

### **Question #4: How do you manage the recruitment and engagement of Connectees and Connectors?**

- Marie-Line uses personal connections, networks, word of mouth, and self-promotion to recruit Connectors. For Connectees she goes to job fairs, and networking events. For engagement of Connectors, she likes to return the favour they are doing for her organization by planning events that are based on their hobbies or interests and allow them to connect to one another personally.
- Nathan has people reach out to him when they are part of a big company wanting to be a connector for Corporate Social Responsibility and Professional Development purposes. He also targets professionals on LinkedIn and contacts leadership teams of his partner companies. For Connectees, he tries to be visible in the community – but they also come through referrals, the YMCA/YWCA, post-secondary institutions, and presentations he does there, job fairs, and word of mouth. For engagement, he often hosts events. For example, at the last Connector Appreciation night, he brought in three Connectees to

share their stories with Connectors, and two ended up being hired because of the event.

- Aman has an active marketing team and takes flyers wherever he goes. He also talked about being visible and present in the community, promoting the program at events, and word of mouth is a huge help to the program. Often, if you have success with one Connectee from one community, you'll see an increase of numbers from that same community in the following days and weeks. He uses LinkedIn a lot with his Connectees and Connectors and gets the word out that way. He also sends pitches to owners, entrepreneurs, and businesses about the program, and how they might get involved. He shares the success of the program through Connector Appreciation posts and events.

#### **Question #5: Why is your program so successful?**

- Aman said that teamwork is one big reason his program is successful – briefing everyone and having everyone on the same page really leads to success. In the onboarding process he shares everything they need in clear, plain language. This helps Connectees understand the culture and come out of their shells to reach out to connectors in a planned, prepared way.
- Nathan also said his team is very strong – and that meeting and finding Connectors who are genuinely open and wanting to help newcomers is crucial to success. The connections the program has with recruiting and labour companies, and with supplying talent to businesses helps the numbers increase, and the program enjoy more success. Connections with owners in the business world is also a key component of the success of the Halifax program.
- A variety of questions were asked about the programs at this point.
  - What are your sources to keep up with the labour market?
    - Keeping up with growth sectors, and the hiring departments in that area (for example, IT, Marine/Ocean Tech, banking)
    - There is not one source for all, follow many companies on LinkedIn, talk to people, go to networking events and stay up to date with your local area.
  - Western REN has a quiz for newcomers if they'd like to live in the Western REN
  - We can use each other as resources as well – we have webinars, resources for newcomers, eLearning, understanding the Canadian Labour Market etc.
  - Is there any specific information to get from Connectors?
    - Understand the network they have, as they have broader networks than you might first assume.
  - How do you manage Connectee's impatience?
    - Ensure they understand that good things take time -and use a human centred approach. Sometimes Connectees apply to every job but letting them know that a better strategy is to focus and spend more time on one resume and cover letter. Tell them to really understand their strengths and weaknesses and pick and highlight specific skills. Connect with people on LinkedIn,

- comment on posts and send messages to local representatives. Show them you are worthy of the position.
  - Showing up to businesses and making a face-to-face connection while applying is also helpful. Follow up if you don't get the job in order to make a connection. Make yourself visible!
  - There is a strategy to getting a job! Tell the Connectee that there will be a few weeks of waiting after application but start a relationship by reaching out. The coordinator can share resources and strengthen and work on the weaknesses of the application in the meantime.
- Marie-Line then had time to answer the question. Her answer was to make mistakes and learn from them. When she first started, she tried things and made mistakes, but learned what to do and what not to do. The program is now much stronger because of this. Mistakes allow you to learn and change parts of the program if you are paying attention closely to what works and what doesn't. Take time out of every month to look back and see what can change, and what should stay the same.

### **Roundtable # 2: Connector Community**

#### **Question #1: Can we share Connectors who have National Networks? How?**

- Yes, but how? We need to have a space where we can talk about these issues, such as a chat, email, or group for Coordinators to share details. This allows for continual communication and is ideal for new coordinators.
- We should strive to refer connectors who move to new locations to the next program, to ensure we don't lose amazing connectors.
- We could share LinkedIn profiles, but questions around confidentiality arose during this discussion. However, LinkedIn profiles are public anyways...

\*\* We have created a Slack Channel for everyone to join and discuss topics on. Currently, topics are connectors and professional development, and there is room to add more topics to the conversation.

#### **Question #2: What other actions can be taken to increase a sense of community and engagement opportunities for Connectors?**

- We should be identifying the value that a Connector gains from the program, such as:
  - Self-learning
  - Identifying talent for companies
  - Developing leadership skills
  - Volunteer experience (and highlighting this on LinkedIn)
  - Online/Social Media presence
  - Building their own networks
  - Helping others/ paying it forward
- We could offer perks for being a Connector such as:
  - Free tickets to events
  - Speaking engagements as events as industry experts



- Gifts (pins, certificates, sweaters, plants, swag etc.)
- Birthday Cards
- Music playlists
- Hold events for Connectors like:
  - All day café style networking (to fit with everyone's schedule)
  - Connector Appreciation
  - Farm tours (for families)
  - Tap room trails/ brewery tours.
  - New Connector Day
- We should highlight them at events outside of the Connector Program for being a part of the program.
- Develop a personalized connection with them so there is an element of trust to help them with their hiring needs.
- If a Connector is looking for a new job, you can help them with their job search.
- Develop a LinkedIn tagline saying, "Proud Connector" or "I am a Connector."
- Using Connector Tags to increase reach on social media – and share success stories!
- Help with brand recognition for companies that engage in the Connector Program.

**Question #3: What are the biggest barriers to engaging/recruiting Connectors?  
How do we overcome them?**

- A barrier for us can be that we don't have a large personal network ourselves to rely on to recruit connectors.
- Sometimes the team we are working on might not be as supportive as we would like them to be. Especially a problem if the Connector program is siloed in the organization and is separate from other programs. This can be difficult to break out of. You might try to tell colleagues, and friends and acquaintances about the program ALL THE TIME.
- Cold calling can be a difficult task – but coordinators must insert themselves into areas they want to break into.
- Building awareness of the program is an absolute must for the success of the program.
- You have to build quality relationships with people, so they want to become Connectors in the program.
- Share the benefits with Connectors (or would be connectors) so they see the value in the program for themselves.
- Make sure to understand why Connectors want to join the program so you can meet their needs, and so they are inspired to do more for the program.
- Use reverse psychology with Connectors – say things like "I think you'd be really good at this" or "Can I ask you a big favour" or "You'll probably say no, but..."
- Sometimes there is a misconception or misunderstanding of the program, so you have to break this before engaging in asking the Connector to get involved.
- We could develop a badge system for Connectors – 100 matches= a platinum badge – we might have a further discussion about this.

#### **Question #4: How might we recruit Connectors who work/hire remotely?**

- Depending on funding, this may or may not be a possible activity for programs.
- However, this may be used in highly specialized situations, because even if a Connector is remote, they may have a very large network across Canada. Also – the way of work is changing, people aren't coming to big cities, they are settling in more rural areas, so we might need to rely on people who work remotely.
- It was noted that we should focus on local people, but taxes are paid to the area where one lives. However, there are still labour shortages in areas, and people might have an issue with connecting people to remote opportunities.
- The issue would be that we might not be able to find these Connectors – but it would also be beneficial if we could keep a list of these companies who are completely remote and share it with everyone.
- Connector Coordinators should reach out to their own networks, past relationships and LinkedIn networks to see if they can find remote workers.
- Remote workers could still share knowledge of Canadian work context and culture and the field they work in if a program is short of connectors.

#### **Roundtable #3: Connectees**

#### **Question #1: What are the biggest barriers to recruiting Connectees and how do we overcome them?**

- In several cases, the actual barrier is filtering through all the Connectees they received in a given month/year – though even in these areas, there is still a large untapped area they have not connected to.
- People tend to self-select into the program. It works best for those who are hungry for it. You want the eager Connectees who are driven and motivated.
- Sometimes funding constraints can make it difficult to recruit into the program.
- Education and awareness around the program is still a big barrier – misconceptions and misunderstandings put barriers up for people.
- Having ambassadors for the program to talk about it, and spread word of mouth is not only helpful, but key to success.
- We need to be able to explain to designated and other organizations in our areas that we are adding value to their programs, and not taking away their clients/participants.
- We need to develop targeted messaging to organizations, connectees, businesses etc. to show how they will gain from utilizing and partnering with the program.

#### **Question #2: How can we help Connectees stay in rural areas?**

- Some aspects to make rural areas more accommodating to newcomers must be done by government. Examples include public transportation, affordable housing, access to health care, encouraging businesses to settle and stay there.
- We can help them find meaningful, good jobs.
- We can introduce Connectees to remote work and technology to accomplish this.

- We can help create community welcome events and networks like Welcome Wagon, recreational activities, teams, festivals, music events/concerts, farmer's markets, social channels etc.
- We can help create access to cultural services and resources (i.e., hair products, food, salons)
- We can have materials in different languages.
- Assistance with funding for entrepreneurship and connect people with those resources (PEI for example helps newcomer businesses open in rural areas)
- We need collaboration at the government, community, and individual levels.
- We can give tours of the area, done by locals – virtually to showcase the community to people who are considering moving to Canada. People don't know about the rural areas, so showcasing them can entice people to move there.
  - Highlighting the uniqueness of the community can draw people there.

**Question #3: Can Programs work to recruit Connectees (newcomers) to our areas?**

- Again, this will depend on individual program rules (also funding differences and whether they can recruit students)
- Some programs might help to encourage international and domestic students to stay in the area.
- Word of mouth can help create a welcoming feel and draw people to the area. Especially established Connectees who have benefited from the program – they can tell their networks/connections about the area.
- We can put a welcoming package at the airport, or online (and add the Connector Program in as a link in these resources). We can sell the area, its benefits, work culture and general culture online or be present at job fairs that promote the area (nationally and internationally).

**Question #4: What are the best examples of value-added activities that engage Connectees?**

- Tangible things at events such as LinkedIn head shots, resources, takeaways, a list of cultural events or associations etc.
- LinkedIn professional workshops
- Meet-up groups that are more social in nature – such as tours, social activities so it becomes more human centered, and we connect the Connectees.
- Informative Workshops are also helpful for Connectees – Cultural differences, your area, mental health, cultural sensitivity etc.
- Hold Connectee ceremonies for “successful connectees.”
- Introduce Connectees on social media to help them further their network and promote their abilities and skills.
- We can teach employers about programs that can help them hire newcomers. We can also share our international market knowledge with them.
- Make sure to make Connectees into Connectors once they land a job!
- Network for genuine relationships, and not just for jobs.
- Human Library, telling your own story and connecting with Connectees and others in this way.

- Showcase the Connector Program to leadership or the HR level to give back to Connectees – for example, getting them to tell Connectees the certifications and skillsets they need/are looking for so Connectees can be prepared to be job ready and know expectations.
- Take suggestions from Connectees (surveys, questionnaires around their struggles or challenges)

### **Presentation #2: Marketing and Events – Elmira Moghimi**

PEI Connectors works with entrepreneurs and job seekers and offers employment support, educational programming, networking assistance in order to support immigrants moving to PEI attach to the job and business market.

PEI differentiates between Connectors and facilitators, facilitators are those with skills that help the program, such as coaches, presenters, etc. Connectors are those who offer Connections, networking advice, references, bridging the gaps in meeting people, and socializing.

Elmira said that the most important skill is active listening, so you can tailor resources and assistance to the Connectee. In order not to overwhelm Connectees, you can have one sentence descriptions of everything you do, along with an online resource tool for everything. She gives everyone a newcomer guide and toolkit with expectations of Connectors and Connectees. Finally, she shares information in sections relevant to their current step in the process, so they aren't overwhelmed, and all jobs that are open are listed in one place on their website.

They hold Connect to Learn sessions which are focused on educating clients and small group networking sessions that are all about making connections for clients. Finally Advancing Career Connections connects job seekers and employers.

Elmira made several suggestions for engaging Connectees and Connectors with events and in the marketing:

- 1) Pick topics based on participants needs and interests.
- 2) Use mixed methods to reach all clients (online, in person, hybrid)
- 3) Always use a survey afterward to find what worked and what didn't.

Elmira's presentation [can be found here.](#)

### **Final Thoughts**

- 1) We should have some sort of indigenous awareness training or information, especially for those going into indigenous businesses or organizations – where can we find resources for them?
- 2) We need to develop a shared communications channel to stay in touch and share profiles, resources, etc.
- 3) We should have some cultural bias/sensitivity training for new coordinators, Connectors, Connectees etc.
- 4) We should have 45-minute monthly meetings instead of 30 minutes.