

A Study of Retrain Manitoba, a successful workforce skills training fund for post-pandemic recovery

ABSTRACT

Canadian governments collaborate with partner organizations to implement public policy. This intensified in 2020 with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. We consider the case of Retrain Manitoba, a \$12.5 million dollar workforce skills development fund that was part of Manitoba's Skills, Talent, and Workforce Strategy. Retrain Manitoba was supported by the Province of Manitoba, the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce and administered by Economic Development Winnipeg (EDW). We detail the purpose, implementation, and select aggregate details of its successful outcomes.

The program's purpose was to help Manitoba organizations affected by the pandemic, by reimbursing companies for micro-credential courses they needed to improve staff skills.

Any Manitoba-based business, not-for-profit, or charity of any size with a valid Manitoba business number in good standing could register for training reimbursement via the Retrain Manitoba portal. The per employee maximum was \$2,500, and per organization maximum was \$75,000. Applications were accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.

For the reimbursement approval, organizations had to send a valid paid receipt via the Retrain Manitoba portal. Once confirmed, funds were paid out within five business days. Training eligible for reimbursement included courses with a start date as early as April 1, 2021, along with training paid for while the program was active. The program was slated to run from November 8, 2021, until March 31, 2022; or until the funds ran out. This occurred on February 4, 2022.

At least 1,365 organizations were reimbursed for training over 18,000 employees. Eighty-seven per cent of the companies were small businesses (0 to 99 employees).

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Retrain Manitoba

Introduction

The Retrain Manitoba program was designed to help firms retrain staff of (mainly) small businesses located across Manitoba recover from the pandemic. The training was micro-credential courses provided by many training providers, including publicly funded post-secondary institutions.

Training eligible for reimbursement included courses with a start date as early as April 1, 2021, along with training paid for while the program was active. The program was slated to run from November 8, 2021, until March 31, 2022; or until the funds ran out. This occurred on February 4, 2022.

At least 1,365 organizations were reimbursed for the training of more than 18,000 employees. Eighty-seven per cent of the companies were small businesses (0 to 99 employees).

About Retrain Manitoba

Motivation

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted economies around the world. Manitoba was no exception. Economic Development Winnipeg (EDW) monitored the Manitoba and Winnipeg economic data throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; noting who was doing well, who was struggling, and changes that helped organizations and residents to adapt. See the three volumes of the Weekly Economic Digest: (Ferris, Weekly Economic Digest, Vol. 1, Issues 6 - 44, 2020), (Ferris, Weekly Economic Digest, Volume 2, Issues 1 - 41, 2021), and (Ferris, Weekly Economic Digest, Vol. 3, Issues 1 - 6, 2022).

In 2021, there was demand by Manitoba organizations for more staff training. This included regular programs (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021), micro-credential courses for their staff, as described in (Mwaba, Baldwin, & Richter, 2021). But what are micro-credentials?

The topic of micro-credentials is an emerging area, with wide variance in terms of governance, oversight, and regulation (Berdahl, 2021). As of November 2021, the Council of Ministers of Education has not yet released a cross-Canada micro-credential framework. (Berdahl, 2021) noted that the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario had released a report (Pichette, Brumwell, Rizk, & Han, 2021) to develop a definition.

“A micro-credential is a representation of learning, awarded for completion of a short program that is focused on a discrete set of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, attributes), and is sometimes related to other credentials.”³

- (Pichette, Brumwell, Rizk, & Han, 2021).

A wider definition expands on the above definition:

*“... a micro-credential can be accepted for credit by an institution or organization or **be an attestation for employers.**”*

³ This definition excludes digital badges.

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- (McGreal, R., Olcott, D. A strategic reset: micro-credentials for higher education leaders. *Smart Learn. Environ.* 9, 9 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-022-00190-1>).

How are these definitions relevant to Retrain Manitoba (RTM)? The COVID-19 disruptions (lockdowns, layoffs, rehiring), and the dramatic switch to remote work increased the demand for retraining, including a surge in demand for micro-credentials. At the same time, many firms were suffering from reduced revenues, increased costs, and significant uncertainty, even if they were able to access government support programs from the provincial or federal governments (Tam, Sood, & Johnston, 2021). This encouraged the development and implementation of what became the RTM program.

When the RTM program was designed, other similar programs were considered. One program that we reviewed was the Digital Transformation Grant (DTG) 2020, (Digital Main Street, 2020). The DTG program was aimed at a niche target audience (specific types of businesses in business improvement areas (BIA)), and niche training programs (digital transformation related).⁴

Design

The DTG niche approach was not appropriate for the aims of RTM. The RTM program was designed to ensure small businesses could access the funding, while not excluding medium and large businesses. Thus, the maximum a business could apply for was \$2,500 per employee, up to a maximum of \$75,000 per company.

The geographic footprint was broadened to all of Manitoba as well, not just Business Improvement Zones (BIZ).⁵ Those who could apply: any Manitoba-based, active business with a valid Manitoba business number, in good standing with the Manitoba Companies Office, not in tax arrears, not receiving more than 50% of their funding from the Province of Manitoba, and not having a government appointed board.

The RTM program was set up to be less restrictive on the acceptable training types. Specifically, training had to be provided by third-party trainers, including in-person, online and industry-recognized courses. Proof of course registration and proof of payment were required for reimbursement.

Much like Alexander the Great solved the problem of the Gordian Knot by cutting through it, (Wikipedia, 2023), requiring proof of payment cut through the typical question of whether the course is useful for the company. It also meant that courses did not have to go through extensive vetting by the EDW staff running RTM. By putting down their precious cash, the organizations revealed their preferences (KENTON, 2020). The details of the application process are spelled out in (Economic Development Winnipeg, 2021a).

⁴ The fourth iteration of the DTG is administered through the Ontario BIA Association and continues to target BIA's (Digital Main Street, 2023).

⁵ Business improvement areas (BIA) and Business Improvement Zones (BIZ) are very similar concepts typically implemented at a municipal level to encourage economic development in a particular geography. For example, see the City of Winnipeg By-law 8111/2002 (City of Winnipeg, 2023b) . The City of Winnipeg currently has sixteen BIZ (City of Winnipeg, 2023a), named and mapped.

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Launch

The Retrain Manitoba program was launched and marketed to the public on November 8, 2021, through multiple channels and sector organizations to ensure businesses heard about the program in a timely manner. The provincial government made a press release (Manitoba Government, 2021), and media picked up the story, including (Dow, 2021) from CTV.

Several of EDW's industry partners and sector organizations invited EDW as a guest speaker to inform their members about RTM. Over 500 people heard about the program from EDW from these meetings. These included the (Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, 2021), (CEDF, 2021), (Manitoba Industry - Academia Partnership, 2021), RRC Polytech, Manitoba Construction Sector Council, Information and Communications Technology Council, Manitoba chapter of the (Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters, 2021), Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC), Northern Manitoba Sector Council, Winnipeg Business Centre, Manitoba Aerospace, New Media Manitoba, and Assiniboine Community College.

EDW held webinars for all eight of Manitoba's economic regions so that organizations had an opportunity to learn about the program (Economic Development Winnipeg, 2021c) early in the process.

The details of the application process were made clear in documents from Economic Development Winnipeg, (Economic Development Winnipeg, 2021a). All applications were handled through the Retrain Manitoba website (Economic Development Winnipeg, 2021b).

A Review of the empirical data

The data from the RTM program is in two database tables. One is for participating organizations, and the other for training details.

Statistics on Participating Organizations

When we consider these employers by employee size, we see that approximately 87 per cent of organizations that received approval were small businesses (0 to 99 employees). **Medium** and **large** businesses had average spending more than 20 per cent below the overall average (Table 1).

Table 1: Employer Statistics by Employee Size

| Employee Size | Share of Businesses | Share of Approved Trainees | Share of Total Approved Dollar Value | Average Spend Index |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 0 to 99 employees | 87.4% | 60.1% | 70.8% | 104 |
| 100 - 499 employees | 9.9% | 30.3% | 22.5% | 75 |
| 500< employees | 2.7% | 9.6% | 6.7% | 67 |
| Grand Total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100 |

We also considered these results from a geographic perspective. At a high level, we see that share of businesses in Winnipeg and outside of Winnipeg is in-line with the share of Manitoba's Winnipeg and non-Winnipeg population (Table 2).

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Table 2: Employer Statistics by Grouped Geography

| Census Agglomerations and all other | Share of Businesses | Share of Approved Trainees | Share of Total Approved Dollar Value | Average Spend Index |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Winnipeg | 65% | 63% | 66% | 101 |
| Other | 35% | 37% | 34% | 97 |
| Grand Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100 |

When we look at the total dollar value by how the employer heard about the program, the top four categories represented just over 75 per cent of the total (Table 3). These were: word of mouth (25.1 per cent), directly from EDW/MCC (22.5 per cent), the training course provider (15.8 per cent), and industry newsletter and publication (11.5 per cent).

Table 3: Employer Statistics by Who Heard It From

| How did you hear about the program? | Share of Businesses | Share of Approved Trainees | Share of Total Approved Dollar Value | Average Spend Index |
|--|---------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Social Media | 8.2% | 4.8% | 7.1% | 116 |
| Training course provider | 14.7% | 16.0% | 15.8% | 114 |
| Word of mouth | 29.3% | 21.0% | 25.1% | 111 |
| Google/search engine | 3.7% | 3.0% | 3.6% | 108 |
| Radio/TV | 4.1% | 3.3% | 4.4% | 99 |
| Other | 10.5% | 10.4% | 9.2% | 91 |
| Employment Assistance Services agency | 0.7% | 0.5% | 0.8% | 83 |
| Directly from Chambers of Commerce/EDW | 19.1% | 26.2% | 22.5% | 83 |
| Industry newsletter/publication | 9.6% | 14.8% | 11.5% | 73 |
| Grand Total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100 |

Statistics on Training

Table 4: Trainer Groups by Share of Total Approved Dollar Value

| Trainer Groups | Share of Total Approved Dollar Value |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Other (more trainers) | 91.9% |
| Other Listed Private Training | 2.2% |
| Manitoba Public Post Secondary Education Institutions ^{6, 7} | 5.9% |
| Grand Total | 100.0% |

⁶ The category, "Other (more trainers)" includes some Manitoba public post-secondary education institutions, and other listed private training. This would boost the shares of both somewhat. We had not completed the data cleansing process, so were not able to show the final percentages at press time.

⁷ Manitoba's public post-secondary education institutions are listed here: (Manitoba Government, 2023).

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This table shows the current market for trainers is diverse. Manitoba's public post-secondary educational institutions provided a large share of the dollar value of the training. Given the diversity of training needs of organizations, there is no surprise that there is a diversity of training providers for micro-credentials.

Conclusion

The design of the program framework was an important part of the program's success. This included what Manitoba firms could apply, the per employee maximum of \$2,500, and per organization maximum of \$75,000. Applications were accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.

Another key to the program's success was a multi-channel approach to the marketing of the program. This involved working with the provincial government, the Manitoba Chambers of Commerce network, training companies, and multiple sector and economic development organizations to reach those organizations likely to access the program. EDW did significant outreach using EDW hosted web meetings, and web or in-person meetings where possible with other organizations. A variety of media organizations also amplified the message to Manitoba organizations.

The Retrain Manitoba website was key for sharing information on the program and collecting information needed for verifying applications and enabling fund payments.

The program succeeded in quickly providing funds to organizations across Manitoba (primarily small organizations). This helped at least 1,365 organizations retrain over 18,000 staff, using micro-credential courses offered by many training organizations.

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