The Bases Are Loaded

by

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The bases are loaded. In baseball terms, this is a good thing. But for the field of community economic development in particular, and low-income Canadians more generally, the loaded bases have created some difficult challenges. These are not insurmountable – but they must first be identified and discussed in order to devise some practicable solutions.

I would like to talk today about the three bases that have a significant impact upon our work: the knowledge-based economy, evidence-based policy and results-based context. I would like to explore the challenges that these three bases raise from a human capital perspective and then suggest some policy options to consider.

The Challenges

Knowledge-Based Economy

We are living in the era of the knowledge-based economy in which economic success depends largely upon nations' ability to create and apply new knowledge. The opportunity embedded in this economic shift arises from the fact that the wealth of nations – and even of regions – no longer depends only upon the presence of coal, forests or fish. Virtually every city, region and country has the actual and potential assets to succeed in the knowledge economy: human beings.

But success requires investment in their development. Knowledge economies require extensive investment in human capital – i.e., the "knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being" [OECD 2001: 18].

Building on the notion of human capital as the foundation for wealth creation, the 2001 Speech from the Throne stated the federal commitment to building a world-class economy driven by innovation, ideas and talent. It pointed out that Canada could realize its potential only by investing aggressively in knowledge and skills, and that building a skilled workforce must be a national effort.

Ottawa recently announced a National Strategy on Learning and Innovation it intends to pursue in collaboration with the provinces and other sectors. I attended the launch of the National Strategy on Learning and Innovation, held in a warehouse that displays farm tractors. In this case, the medium truly was the message: The tractors were equipped with sophisticated computer equipment that generates extensive information. No longer was a driver's license the only requirement to maneuver a tractor – but the driver basically had to be a computer expert in order to use the equipment.

In fact, changing technologies in all fields have meant that there is a rising requirement for literacy, numeracy and computer skills. The knowledge economy requires higher levels of knowledge and skills as well as continual upgrading in response to changing technologies. Information and skills acquisition must be far more responsive to the rapidity of these changes. But appropriate training mechanisms have not yet been designed – at least on a broad scale – to match the learning pace that the new economy demands.

Moreover, some workers cannot get access to existing training programs. The Employment Insurance Act introduced by the federal government in 1996 had far more stringent eligibility requirements than the Unemployment Insurance Act it replaced. Many unemployed workers do not qualify for income benefits if they lose their jobs. Equally serious, they do not have access to the employment benefits provided through Employment Insurance [Torjman 2000].

There are far too many workers excluded from the labour market because they cannot meet the higher levels of knowledge and skill required and/or they have no access to the training that would help them acquire essential knowledge and skills. There is work under way throughout the country, and indeed the world, on the impact of learning and training on social exclusion and marginalization.

A major weakness of the National Strategy on Learning and Innovation is that it does not pay sufficient attention to workers who are marginalized as a result of this need for greater knowledge and expertise as well as the continual upgrading of skills. But the Strategy does focus considerable attention upon innovation.

The concept of innovation has been applied both in Canada and abroad through the practice of cluster-based economic development. This framework for regional economic development is based on the recognition that healthy regional economies are composed of clusters and their supporting economic infrastructure [Economic Development Administration 1997: 1].

The theory is founded on the assumption that industry clusters drive metropolitan economies and have the potential to generate substantial employment. Industry clusters refer to interrelated, geographically concentrated industries along with their key suppliers and supporting institutions.

This model of economic development is consistent with the growing global recognition of the role of cities and of local regions as the engines of national economies. This awareness has created pressure for major cities to become 'world class' actors on the international stage. In order to survive in this competitive environment, cities need to attract investment and the best possible talent in the world.

The cities of Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton – among others in the country – currently are engaged in cluster-based economic development. Many regions throughout the US, including

Silicon Valley, Austin, Texas, and Southwestern Pennsylvania, also are involved in a similar process. These regions are identifying the drivers of their economy and are targeting the associated skills and infrastructure to support the health of their respective clusters. This process opens up opportunities for training and for a systemic and systematic method of human capital development.

Another opportunity arises from the prospective job vacancies related to Canada's aging population. Women and men age 65 and older are projected to reach 8.3 million or 22.7 percent of the population by 2031 [Policy Research Initiative 1999]. The effects of this aging population are felt first in the labour market where, for the time being at least, there are more experienced workers than there are younger workers [Schetagne 2001: 4]. A shortage of skilled labour now is forecast in many fields, including nursing, education and construction. But these opportunities will be meaningless unless the associated training is in place.

Evidence-Based Policy

We are living in an era of 'evidence-based' policy. The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, for example, was formed in 1997 to facilitate evidence-based decision-making in Canada's health sector. This type of decision-making requires improved cooperation between researchers and decision-makers. The Foundation has adopted the philosophy of 'linkage and exchange' to increase the relevance and use of health services research.

The problem is that the government does not practise what it preaches. There is substantial evidence on 'what works' with respect to labour market initiatives but little action in these areas.

The OECD, in particular, has carried out extensive research on the theme of 'active' social policy. It had identified as a problem the disproportionate provision of 'passive' support for the unemployed in the form of income security and social services. It recommended, instead, that there be a greater focus upon so-called active programs that help individuals acquire the knowledge and skills they need to move toward self-sufficiency [OECD 1994]. (I should note that while Caledon fully supports investment in human capital, we have problems with the terms 'active' and 'passive.' We disagree with the notion that income security be considered a passive form of support – particularly in a labour market characterized by earnings disparities.)

Studies of various active interventions have found, for example, that job search assistance – such as counselling and job clubs – was the least costly intervention. Yet it had consistently positive outcomes due to active work placement and the increased motivation of the unemployed [OECD 1998].

The OECD also has found that while developed countries tend to make substantial investments in training programs, these have not proven effective overall. General training not geared to

market needs has been less successful in its outcomes than targeted approaches. The most effective measures involve a partnership arrangement with participation from employers, labour and other partners, such as community colleges.

The question is: Has Canada applied these OECD lessons? Are we guided by 'what works'? No. Our policy frameworks and associated financing mechanisms are not geared to apply the OECD lessons very effectively.

Take one example. 'Customized training' is a successful active labour market measure. Under this approach, a designated community-based organization engages with local employers to identify the training needs for targeted jobs. The designated organization works alone, or with local training institutes, to provide short-term, intensive training that prepares individuals for the targeted jobs. The partner companies, in turn, use the designated organization as a hiring window because it already has pre-screened and trained prospective workers [Torjman 1999].

Customized training differs from traditional training in several key ways. Because traditional training often takes (at least) several months, many unemployed workers cannot go without a source of income for so long. Ironically, some remain on social assistance (commonly known as 'welfare') because they cannot afford to invest in training for a long period without some form of income support. Even individuals eligible for a student loan may be daunted by the prospect of carrying a large debt with no job security at the end of the day.

Customized training typically is not geared to meet the needs of workers considered 'hard to employ' – i.e., persons with serious language and learning difficulties and/or significant personal or family problems. It is not the only solution and certainly not the solution for all. But it *is* an effective method of training for many.

Customized training also has broader application than simply helping welfare recipients find a job. It is a means of upgrading on an ongoing basis the skills of workers already employed. It is one way of giving life to the concept of lifelong learning – which, in the new labour market, means lots of short learning all the time.

In Canada, one of the most advanced models of customized training has been developed by the nonprofit Opportunities for Employment in Winnipeg. By April 1999, the program had passed the 1,000 mark for placements since its inception in 1996. Nearly 70 percent of recruits placed in full-time jobs are still employed.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation in Toronto is another example of an organization that has successfully employed customized training in four major streams: computer applications, industrial skills, child care and language skills. It serves an estimated 5,000 clients a year, about half of whom are involved in its training programs. The organization claims an 80 percent success rate – which means that participants remain in their jobs for a minimum six-month period.

But this successful model is the exception, not the rule. Despite the shift towards active programming, Canada has a long way to go in adopting the approaches that international research has found to be effective.

The lack of sufficient and stable funding is the primary impediment to continued success. There are simply not enough funds to support the training of all prospective workers. Many unemployed – young people, new Canadians, those involved in the corrections system and the underemployed – do not come with training dollars 'attached' to income security programs, such as Employment Insurance or welfare. The funding problems make it difficult to provide customized training for all, regardless of their background or work history.

Results-Based Context

The third base with which we are dealing is the results-based world. Accountability and outcomes are popular Ottawa buzzwords.

The outcomes imperative is more than just rhetoric. Part 2 of the Employment Insurance Act requires that employment benefits run by the provinces respect certain guidelines. The programs must be "results based" and help individuals obtain or keep employment. They must reduce "reliance" on government assistance. A framework must be put into place to "evaluate results." The agreements must encourage individuals to take personal responsibility for identifying their employment needs and, if appropriate, share the cost of assistance.

The real standard or benchmark that programs apparently must meet is that they must deliver "positive results" (read "numbers employed"). The performance of local employment offices is assessed on the basis of the money they save the EI account. As a consequence, more resources are directed towards individuals with few employment barriers and who require relatively little support. The employment system effectively is involved in 'creaming' – i.e., targeting efforts toward those considered work-ready and most likely to succeed in the labour market.

There are unrealistic time frames even for those individuals considered relatively independent. For example, it takes far longer than the time allowed in the self-employment assistance component of Employment Insurance or Ontario Works for a sole entrepreneur to create a viable business.

Unrealistic expectations create a burden not only for program participants; such expectations also pose problems for the organizations contracted to do the training. They simply cannot produce the expected positive results within the allocated time. Organizations that fail to meet the required targets do not get paid. They are under pressure to shortchange participants and/or select those most

likely to succeed. The real results? The selection of the 'fittest' candidates – i.e., those likely to find paid employment very quickly [Torjman 2000].

I think we should be concerned about the obsession with outcomes as part of the current preoccupation with accountability. Many crucial and equally important developments inadvertently can be overlooked in the quest to quantify. A strict focus on numerically defined targets can make it difficult to provide employment supports that are more 'social' in nature, including the wide range of supports that enable the transition to work and ensure attachment to the labour market.

Policy Options

There are several interventions or remedies that can be spearheaded by community economic development organizations and by governments – preferably working together. These interventions include labour market partnerships, labour market supports and labour market information.

Labour market partnerships

Active partnerships at the local level can help promote the development of human capital, including marginalized workers. This is important for identifying labour market needs, developing market-relevant training and securing the required financing. Local governments, in particular, can play an important role in these efforts – as convener and/or partner.

The Regional Government in Ottawa-Carleton (now the City of Ottawa), for example, was concerned about the high rates of unemployment and underemployment in the region [Huntley 1998]. Many groups, including those to which we supposedly pay disproportionate attention through our human rights protections, were being left on the economic margins, at great cost to the economy and to society.

On another front, the Caledon Institute had been approached to become involved as a research and policy partner in a community-based initiative, called Opportunities 2000, to reduce poverty in Waterloo Region. To achieve this objective, the project sought to mobilize the entire community. It set up a Leadership Roundtable composed of representatives from business, low-income households, government and social agencies.

A number of other communities heard about this work through a learning consortium Caledon had organized as part of the project. The Chairman of the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton (now Mayor of Ottawa) approached Caledon to write a labour force development strategy for the Region, modelled on the multisectoral approach employed by Opportunities 2000 [Torjman 1999a].

Based on the recommendations, the Mayor created Partners for Jobs with representatives from business, labour, anti-poverty groups, education, social services, and the federal and provincial governments. Because of this cross-sectoral representation, the initiative was able to generate new forms of training, apprenticeship and job creation that had never been tried. The welfare department and business community worked together to develop customized training. Special projects also were undertaken to recognize the skills credentials of new Canadians and to provide job supports for persons with disabilities.

Partners for Jobs was successful in its results – nearly 1,300 unemployed workers were trained and found good work in less than two years. Part of the success was due to the fact that the training was market-relevant. Partners for Jobs also helped participants with associated problems related to child care, lack of funds for transition to work and lack of funds for business startup.

For years, the European Union has embraced this partnership approach to training, financing and mentoring. There are examples in the US as well. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, for example, launched the Jobs Initiative in 1995. It is an eight-year demonstration project designed to improve access to family-supporting jobs for disadvantaged young adults in inner-city communities. The Foundation provided funds to six sites – Denver, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Seattle – to develop and implement job strategies, and test effective ways to promote access to employment [Plastrik et al 2001].

The planning phase from 1995 to 1997 focussed upon bringing together key stakeholders, analyzing regional barriers and opportunities, developing initial strategies for improving employment access and identifying possible projects in which the local initiative could invest. The purpose of this phase was to establish a multisectoral governance mechanism that could take responsibility for harnessing key resources in the community and developing an action plan.

While the projects within each site varied widely, several common elements contributed to their success. First, employer involvement in both planning and training was essential. Second, the projects that succeeded paid clear attention to the major sectors of the local economy and sought ways to support those sectors. Health care, manufacturing, construction and hospitality were the major sectors in which employment was found. Third, all the sites found that it was important to pay attention to soft skills, such as work attitudes. Post-placement services also played a central role in ensuring the success of the initiatives.

Following the planning phase, the sites undertook a three-year capacity-building phase to institute the organizational structure and other mechanisms necessary to implement their planned job projects. Each site also was expected to put together a Jobs Policy Network to begin developing the site's policy agenda.

Finally, the implementation phase is expected to last four years – talk about a long-term investment! During this period, the sites are expected to engage in a series of activities to advocate for institutional change and systems reform.

But partnerships at the local level can be successful only to the extent that there is sufficient support for individual projects, such as customized training, that fall under the larger community 'umbrella.' As noted, despite the success of customized training programs, they have not been supported by Canadian governments or industry in any consistent or systematic way. Most programs operate on shoestring budgets.

Moreover, training funds tend to be tied to individuals and there is relatively little investment in the infrastructure of the actual programs delivering the service. This lack of core support makes it difficult to serve the entire community.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation, for example, receives funds in respect of clients on Employment Insurance and on behalf of participants in Ontario Works. This gap leaves LEF struggling to make ends meet with respect to providing training for all, regardless of their background or work history. The Learning Enrichment Foundation is trying to address this problem by establishing a community skill development fund to which private employers would contribute. Because the money would be directed into a pool of funds, the contribution of individual employers – especially that of very small businesses – would be relatively modest.

The success of partnerships and their individual program efforts depends not only on secure financing. It depends as well upon accurate labour market information.

Labour market information

Programs focussed upon human capital must be based upon solid and up-to-date information. Herein lies a big gap. The federal Department of Human Resources Development conducts a wide range of national surveys. Its regional and local offices focus upon developing local labour market profiles. But there are problems with the existing data.

The first is that the occupational classifications currently used must be updated. Many occupations have emerged since the development of the National Occupational Classification Coding System. Moreover, labour force information by individual occupational code is available only from the Census, which means that the information is dated by the time it is made available. There is typically a two-year lag time for analysis.

There is also an inordinate reliance in developing the local profile on 'help wanted' ads in newspapers. These listings do not take into account electronic labour exchanges, job vacancies typically posted in union hiring halls or even help-wanted signs that many retailers simply place in their windows.

Jobs also are being advertised increasingly through e-based searches. Groups and organizations posting in this way know that they will be reaching people who are interested in or already working in a given field, such as community economic development or social entrepreneurship. In effect, employers are targeting their advertising in the hope that they tap into a pool of relevant knowledge and skills.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that there is currently no reliable way of identifying *emerging* labour force needs at the local level; information tends to focus primarily upon what exists right now. Moreover, numbers of vacancies are counted but there is no precise information as to the skills required for those jobs, especially in emerging areas. Neither is there any consensus on the definition of 'shortage.'

The Strategic Human Resources Analysis Division of Human Resources Development Canada has been involved in helping private industry identify specific human resource needs through sector analysis. The Department has established partnerships involving management, labour, academics, governments and other industry representatives to take coordinated action on human resource issues.

As a first step, an extensive analysis of individual sectors is undertaken. Each sector study is national in scope and examines how various factors, such as changes in technology and the domestic and global business environment, affect the labour force of a particular industrial sector. The follow-up to several of these studies has been the formation of joint business-labour organizations, or sector councils, whose purpose is to identify and act on the human resource needs most relevant to their constituents. Sector councils formulate comprehensive human resource plans, coordinate the development of national standards and help forge links among educators, employers and employees [Gunderson and Sharpe 1998].

Yet another challenge arises from trying to apply national information to the local level. There are technical problems involved in trying to disaggregate national information to the provincial and territorial levels, let alone to the regional and local levels. But it is precisely this level of disaggregation that is required if local economies are truly to act as engines of growth.

Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada recently released the Workplace and Employee Survey. It is an important source of information in that it profiles the type and extent of workplace training in the country along with related issues such as technology use, work arrangements and organizational change. The survey links employees to their workplace (24,600 employees to nearly 6,400 work locations). Data are collected on employee participation in

workplace training according to type of establishment, job training by needs of the employer and employees' level of human capital [Statistics Canada 2001].

Forty percent of employees report taking professional and/or computer software training. The smaller firms do not support classroom training to the same extent as the larger firms. Small firms may be using on-the-job training as a substitute for expensive classroom training. Larger firms prefer both forms of training. The financial insurance, communication and utilities sectors have the highest training participation rates while the real estate services and construction sectors have the lowest participation rates. Professionals and full-time workers engage most actively in training.

All this is important information in a knowledge economy. But it is not possible to apply it to the local level. So, for example, if a city or region wanted to know the extent to which its local businesses are engaged in training, it would not be able to use this national data. The sample sizes are too small in certain areas and there could be confidentiality problems in identifying which firms were engaged in training activities.

In order to obtain labour market information that is relevant to the local level, surveys must be developed and conducted by a given city or individual sectors. This gives rise to other issues, such as questions of ownership and use of proxy measures. The federal government could expedite and facilitate this process by developing guidelines for the collection of local labour market information.

Labour market supports

Human capital development involves more than simple investment in knowledge and skills. It also includes the provision of labour market supports.

Working families, for example, need a wide range of social and health service supports to enhance their parenting capacity, ease the conflicts between work and home, and help deal with problems that income alone cannot solve. Child care, early childhood development and supplementary health care are key items among a range of positive supports for families with children. In fact, the OECD findings on 'what works' in active programs are particularly relevant. They call for a variety of investments in early childhood development on the grounds that labour market programs cannot compensate for deficits developed in childhood [OECD 1998].

In these areas, family policy in Canada has been classified as "modest and reluctant"; Canada like the US, New Zealand and the UK are considered "laggards" in the area of progressive family policy [Kamerman and Kahn 1997: 16].

The Learning Enrichment Foundation has long recognized that many prospective participants would not be able to partake of its programs – be it language, skills training or job search – unless they had access to affordable, high-quality child care. In response to this need, LEF set up its own network of child care centres and currently operates 13 licensed centres throughout the city for about 650 children.

The program also trains participants as early childhood assistants. The course combines practical experience with classroom work in the areas of child development, curriculum planning, and safety and nutrition. Graduates receive a certificate as an early childhood assistant as well as certification in emergency first aid and childhood CPR. Graduates are helped to find employment in child care centres, family resource programs, drop-in centres and in private families as nannies.

Another crucial area of 'passive' investment has been largely ignored in Canada: measures that help reduce the direct and indirect costs of working. The cost of health- and disability-related special needs (including prescription drugs and dental care) present a major barrier to employment. The special assistance budget within provincial welfare systems typically provides for these needs in the form of wheelchairs, hearing aids, prosthetic equipment, medications and assistive devices for independent living or work. When recipients try to move off welfare, they may lose access to this vital health-related assistance.

Supplementary health-related benefits should be extended to a broader segment of Canadians and not just to those who receive income support. The goal should be to make these benefits available to all low-income households not currently covered by employer-supplied or individually purchased private insurance, notably most of Canada's working poor.

A related problem arises from the fact that prospective workers often are blocked from entering or reentering the labour market because of the costs associated with job search or return to work. These include bus fare or transportation for job interviews; work clothing or warm outdoor clothing where required; license to drive a vehicle for work purposes or to operate equipment; professional dues; and work tools or protective gear. There is a need for financial assistance for the transitional period during which unemployed and low-income underemployed workers try to establish themselves in the labour market or participate in education or skills development.

Job retention is another important labour market support. As part of the Partners for Jobs initiative, a pilot project was undertaken to test the delivery of job retention services for Ontario Works participants. Job retention includes any type of support that assists an individual through the transition process to paid employment and has been identified as critical to the success of any workforce development strategy.

Two job retention staff were assigned to specific Partners for Jobs employment initiatives, providing support during short-term training, transition to employment and during the first six month in employment. The support workers targeted both the trainer and the person involved in the

program. Part of the process involved collaborative work with trainers and employers to inform them of the challenges faced by this group and the importance of creating a supportive training or work environment [Office of Workforce Development 2002].

Job retention supports to the individual included regular on-site visits, short-term counselling, advocacy, referral, problem-solving and mediation. The issues that support workers were asked to address included work-related problems such as irregular attendance, difficulty with co-workers and problems related to shift work. Financial issues had to do with concerns around the costs of work or the costs of special needs. Child care issues related to participants' difficulty in finding high-quality, affordable child care. Personal issues included concerns related to housing, legal and medical problems, language, alcohol and drug abuse, or learning disability.

An evaluation of the pilot intervention found that job retention support increased the rate of training by 15 percent overall [Office of Workforce Development 2002]. One month after training, 74 percent of clients in initiatives with job retention were employed, compared to 54 percent without job retention. In the health sector training initiatives with job retention services, 94 percent of participants were still employed after one month compared to 56 percent of those without those services. In short, job retention services were found to have a highly positive impact on sustaining employment for participants. More than 91 percent of those trained are still employed at six months.

Conclusion

The fact that the bases are loaded should be not a hindrance – but an opportunity. We can begin by creating labour market partnerships and securing financing for training. We can collect labour market information to help guide the human capital investment in communities. We can provide associated labour market supports that are essential prerequisites to skills development and job retention. There are ways to move forward on the human capital agenda – and to ensure that it includes *all* workers.

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