WISE Project - Research Highlights

Construction-sector Work Integration Social Enterprises

Jonah Pearce 2024

Contents

About this Document

This document describes how and why construction-sector work integration social enterprises (or construction-sector social enterprises, for short) are structured, and how they have grown to support people who experience barriers to employment (generally) and barriers to entry into the construction industry (specifically).

This document is a research highlight generated from a larger study titled, “An ethnographic study of Black and racialized WISE participants, and their post-WISE employers in the construction industry in Winnipeg, Toronto and Saskatoon.” (WISE stands for “Work integration social enterprise.) Material shared here is from data collected during the first year of the four year study.

Four construction-sector social enterprises are involved in this study, and are located in Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and Toronto. They range in size from 25 to 160+ in their training and supported employment programs per year, and although they have some significant organizational (programmatic) differences, they also share significant similarities. As per our organizational agreement with the social enterprises, we have anonymized each of the organizations.

Research was designed and conducted by lead researcher Jonah Pearce, PhD, with research assistance by Rosty Othman (PhD Candidate, University of Manitoba), and community researchers Tamara Bailey, Jaleal Wright, and Ralph Lee who work as Alumni Coaches at Building Up Toronto.

All researchers involved in the project have completed the Course on Research Ethics based on the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical

Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2: CORE 2022). The research project has received approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. The research was funded by ESDC Canada, and sponsored by the Social Enterprise Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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01.
Introduction

Introduction

This report stems from a multi-site longitudinal study interested in understanding how construction-sector social enterprises work with racialized participants experiencing barriers to employment to gain work-relevant skills and find employment with secondary employers.

The first year of the study involved over 50 hours of participant observation at the four social enterprises participating in the study, and 64 interviews with participants of construction-sector social enterprises (N=43), staff at social enterprises (N=19) as well as industry (N=2)(See Table 1: Research Participants, Year 1).

We also held a focus group with social enterprise staff (3 of the 4 participating WISE), plus 4 other construction sector social enterprises in January 2024. The session explored the strengths of construction sector social enterprises, and what they have to offer private construction employers in terms of hiring and retention knowledge with the populations the construction-sector social enterprises work with.

Table 1: Research Participants, Year 1 (N=64)	
WISE participants	43
WISE staff	19
Industry	2

Four construction-sector social enterprises are enrolled in the study, located in three Canadian cities (Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and Toronto). They range in size from 25 to 160+ participants in their training and supported employment programs per year, and although they have some significant organizational (programmatic) differences, they also share significant similarities.

Each is a non-profit organization run by a volunteer board of directors; each hires and trains people to work in the trades; and, each works predominantly with people who are racialized within their respective labour markets and face additional barriers to employment, such as. insecure housing, incomplete education, lack of work experience, and for some, criminal records.

Each organization provides a range of social, cultural and technical/educational supports, although the breadth of supports differs according to the organization's size and subject to the amount of funding each is able to procure..

The other commonality between the organizations is that each engages in earning revenue through the sale of services to clients. Services include energy and water retrofits, painting, rehabilitation and apartment “turnovers,” to demolition and construction clean up, to new commercial builds.

Revenue from service-related work pays for staff (construction and, in some instances, support staff), supplies, and, when possible, for continuing to employ participants past any funding-supported employment time limits provided by government or foundation funders. Clients are predominantly public sector clients (public housing providers, city works’ departments) or other non-profit organizations (especially social housing providers). A smaller fraction of work comes from subcontracting on large commercial projects (demo, construction clean-up).

All organizations seek and receive funding from external sources. Government and foundation funders provide financial support for support staff (primarily), some construction training staff, training-related costs (such as safety certification), and time-limited entry level wages for participants. When funding for wages is provided by governments or foundations, all training wages are limited to 3 to 6 months.

Partnerships with outside organizations are key to all the participating organizations to be able to provide adequate education, training, and supports to their participants. For example, in Toronto, a partnership with the Toronto Board of Education has enabled an on-site math teacher to be located at their training centre, which allows all participants to work toward formal high school math credits while in the program. In Winnipeg, partnership with SEED Winnipeg, a financial empowerment charity, provides participants with money management training and enrollment in a savings program.

Such partnerships enrich the offerings program participants receive, and are one of the ways the WISE organizations seek to provide participants with relevant training and/or services even within an environment of very tight budgets and uncertain funding. Three of the 4 organizations in this study have developed or been developing relationships with secondary employers. (The one organization who had not is newer and the smallest of the four organizations.) For the study's purpose, "secondary employers" include private and nonprofit employers (in the main, other social enterprises).

In addition, one of the organizations has developed a robust post-training program for past participants to remain connected with the organization as well as with other participants. This innovation allows past participants to be coached and guided as they learn to navigate the complexities of employment and training in the construction industry. The other WISE organizations have varying degrees of support for past-participants, most of which is provided on an ad-hoc basis.

All organizations serve adults, aged 18 and above.

We have anonymized the data, including the names of the organizations. In presenting this report, we share information about the WISE

organizations as a group if doing otherwise would compromise anonymity

Grouping the four organizations together makes noting some of the key differences between them difficult. Most pointedly, each organization operates in labour markets that have characteristics that are unique and relevant to their organization's programming and strategies for participants exiting the WISE. For example, one city's construction sector is heavily unionized, meaning that most successful entries into construction happen via union membership. The WISE organization located there has spent a lot of time developing relationships with various unions.

Other key differences include the makeup of their local construction sector (how big it is; the influence of national or international firms), and demographic differences in racialized hiring.

One thing each WISE organization shares is that as a *construction* social enterprise, the availability of jobs fluctuates with the Canadian seasons, making participant exits in December and January very difficult (SE Staff Interview 16). Across the three cities in which the organizations are located, all exiting participants are subject to annual downturns in construction.

But downtowns aside, the major thing construction sector social enterprises have in common is who they work with: people with barriers to employment (broadly speaking) and barriers to the construction industry (specifically). For reasons that will be explained later, participants tend to be racialized in their respective labour markets, and either have little formal work experience in the construction sector or are new to Canada.

In this study, the majority of Indigenous participants are located in the two prairie

provinces, and the majority of Black participants stem from Ontario.

Because of the sector and the participants they work with, all the organizations face the following dual question, as put by an executive director: "The question at the end of training is, Is there a job for them? And are they stable enough?" (SE Staff 16, 18).

This report will describe how construction sector social enterprises work to ready participants for employment in the construction sector, staging social and cultural interventions aimed at stabilizing individuals, along with trades training.

How the construction sector social enterprises in this study are programmatically organized to accomplish their dual role depends on their size and history. To capture some of the similarities and differences of the four organizations, we developed a typology based on programmatic operations present at the organizations (Figure 1):

Training program: A time-based paid training program, which includes social support, life skills and employment readiness training. Training usually includes classroom and on-site learning. Training programs rely on funding from governments and foundations to operate. Three of the four organizations run time-limited training programs.

Supported employment: Employees are hired because they face barriers to employment and are often equity-deserving groups. Unlike training programs, employment is not limited to a particular duration. Supported employment is paid for through earned revenue but can be supplemented with government or foundation funding. Participants who complete a time-limited training program can stay on for a set or indeterminate time. All four organizations provided supported employment. One of the four only offers

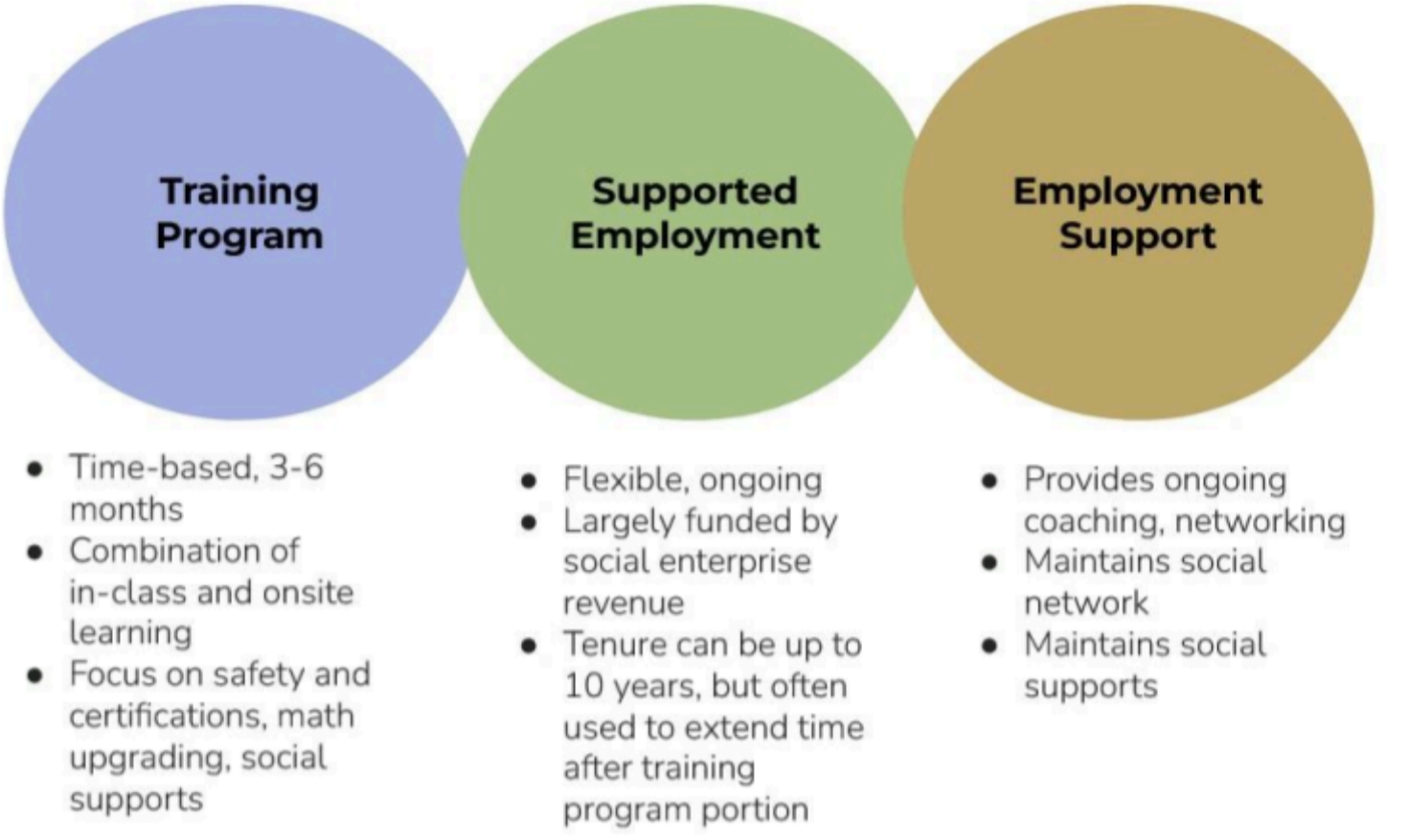

Fig 1. **A typology of construction social enterprise programs**

supported employment, meaning participants do not have a set completion date. Supported employment at these organizations offer some leeway for participants who would otherwise be completing their time at an organization during a downturn in the construction sector, or for those who might need more social or cultural supports in order to stabilize their lives.

Because the completion time is by definition murky, along with flexibility comes a set of issues each social enterprise must navigate: pay scales, measuring and reporting social impact are just a few issues that arise that we will explore in the next section. Most supported employment is directly dependent on the social enterprise's earned revenue.

Employment support: Either post-training or post-supported employment that support past participants to succeed in apprenticeship, private sector or nonprofit employment. One organization formally provided employment support, whereas the other three organizations provided such support on an ad-hoc basis.

Because the above is a typology developed for the purpose of communicating the research, it is worth noting that the organizations themselves don't think of themselves within these categories.

All of the organizations self-describe themselves as social enterprises, three of which have a training program and one which offers support to past-participants. What the typology offers for the purpose of research reporting is to note some of the differences within the organizations, without compromising their anonymity.

In the remainder of this section, we describe the participants who are accessing the construction-sector social enterprises in this study. We then describe how the WISE organizations are programmatically organized (again, employing the typography introduced above), briefly describing their purpose, challenges and successes.

Participants in WISE

Of the 43 interviewees who were recruited to this study, about half were Black or Other racialized with the other half identifying as Indigenous or Metis.

Table 2: Race and ethnicity of WISE Participants (N=43)	
Black	11
Other racialized	9
Indigenous and Metis	18
White	2
Undisclosed	3

Other racialized includes people who identified as Asian, Middle Eastern and South Asian. Note that one person who identified as "White" said they were "mixed white and Metis."

Seventy percent of interviewed participants were men, and 30% were women.

The majority of participants interviewed had some form of previous work experience (79%), with only 16% of participants reported they had no previous experience (5% did not disclose work experience).

Previous work experience fell into two camps: low-wage work in the retail, telemarketing, the gig economy, security or construction (largely residential "handyman" renovation) and, for immigrants, professional or technical fields (eg. engineering, data management).

New Canadians named not having Canadian work experience as their biggest barrier. As noted by one participant, lack of work experience and formal certifications made getting a job in the construction industry impossible:

"Before getting into [WISE], I had trouble to get into construction because although I had a little bit of experience in construction in [another city], but I did not have a proper Canadian experience, proper skills and certifications to apply for jobs in construction and to pursue a meaningful career in construction" (WISE Participant 28, 2).

For most of the participants who were new immigrants, their lack of success was not due to lack of trying to be become employed, even those they had extensive experience in construction, as this participant did: "Before [coming to WISE], I tried so many companies...but most of them they needed what I call 'Canadian experience'" (WISE Participant 6, 3).

Canadian-born participants (Indigenous, Metis, and Black) experiencing interruptions and

ongoing barriers to employment stemmed from incarceration. As put by one participant, “a lot of companies won’t hire you if you are a criminal” (WISE Participant 34, 3). This sentiment was expressed by the many of the participants that experienced incarceration.

For participants with some previous experience in the construction trades, previous exposure came from prison programs or by working as a general helper in small “handyman” outfits. As noted by multiple participants, what the WISE organization offered was more technical know-how, certifications, and construction-industry job readiness training:

“I didn’t know how to do drywall work before. I did a little bit, but I was just a helper, right? Doing odd jobs. But now I have a full understanding of what needs to be done" (WISE Participant 32, 3).

Or, as noted by another WISE participant, “I thought I knew how to use the measuring tape, but there was so much more that we learned about it” (Participant 22, 4).

Whether participants were immigrants or had been incarcerated prior to coming to the WISE, it was clear across interviews with participants that the social supports provided by the WISE were integral to their current and future success:

“It’s hard enough when you get out of jail...getting a job, getting housing, getting everything you need and having a place like this that helps you with all that stuff. It takes just such a huge weight off of you” (WISE Participant 24, 6).

“...if we’re going through something, they’re there for us to help us get through that and carry on. And then the teachings and the healing, and stuff like that...it keeps me striving” (WISE Participant 21, 5).

Social supports include one-on-one support to get ID and bank accounts, applying to school or apprenticeship, paying down fines and working on obtaining a driver's license, and addressing relationship and living situations. Social supports include mental health support, from days off for mental health reasons or access to counselors.

Support also comes in the form of “reality therapy” (SE Staff 1, 24) and providing emotional buttressing as participants navigate challenges. As described by one executive director, all staff are expected to provide some level of emotional competency and support to participants, saying to their staff, “remember that you are their auntie and uncle, and you keep your eyes open for opportunity because we want to give soft handoffs and make sure that everybody has a home after [time at the social enterprise]”(SE Staff 16, 15).

The social supports WISE organizations offer vary depending on the size of the organization – bigger organizations having more positions and thus more dedicated people to provide social and cultural supports.
Notably, social supports are the most vulnerable to being cut because they are almost exclusively funded by government or foundation funding. Social supports provided by the WISE organizations were especially important to WISE participants, many who noted WISE staff: “listen and they hear you” (SE Participant 22, 5).

Variously, WISE participants describe major and minor social, cultural and economic hardship. From immigrating by themselves, to periods of homelessness, past trauma stemming from childhood abuse, growing up in group homes, being incarcerated at a young age, the majority of WISE participants interviewed had few to no family or community-based supports. For many, the social supports offered by the WISE organizations offered “a backup in case something goes wrong” (WISE Participant 12, 6).

It was not surprising then that in both interviews with WISE participants and staff, for many the WISE offered something akin to "family":

> "[WISE] is like a very good family for me....When I came here...they not only teach me, but they back me up. They look after me. Like, what are my problems? What are my concerns? What are my challenges? They see you and they understand you and they guide you. They help you to watch how your life gets easier and more easier" (WISE Participant 11, 9-10).

The language of family (including use of "auntie" and "uncle," as used by the executive director, cited above) was common across all SE staff. Other staff describe this as unconditional support, for example:

"I'm trying to support them to give them a place to go when they don't know how to do their own life" (SE Staff 1, 13).

And:

"Once you're a part of our family, you want to be a part of our family, you're going to still be a part of our family in five years...And just having that with them, just knowing that they actually belong to somewhere, to someone, I think, makes a world of difference for them because chances are they've never had a sense of belonging anywhere.... [My] job is to protect them and to basically guide them through this whole process, right? Which is basically life and adulting...kind of help them navigate what I would do as a parent.... We're the aunties and we're going to help you"
(SE Staff 6, 32).

Although WISE participants spoke positively about their experience at the WISE organization, they were also participating while dealing with serious and ongoing issues: from precarious housing and living situations, uncertain immigration status, strict bail conditions, to maintaining sobriety in often high-stress home lives. As one SE staff put it, participants "are still in survival mode" many months after they start at the WISE (SE Staff 22, 26). In an extreme case, one participant described living in a halfway house where they feared being raped and roped back into drug use (WISE Participant 41).

Other barriers participants faced were access to transportation, lack of childcare options, and the low wage (for most: minimum wage) they earned while at the WISE. As put bluntly by one participant "being able to afford work" was an ongoing barrier (WISE Participant 1).

In addition, as described by one SE staff person in a support role, across a spectrum of individual circumstances, WISE participant's can carry with them invisible but significant wounds: "People's past can keep following them and be attached and like...almost dragging them back" (SE Staff 1, 15).

Despite the many material, social and cultural challenges they face, WISE programs and their staff see incredible growth in participants during their time with the organization. As put by one SE Staff (Construction): "The growth level [of participants] is amazing...I've been in the construction industry now for about 16, 17 years. Even with people who go to trade schools, you don't find this. You don't find that level of growth" (SE Staff 13, 6).

WISE staff and programs

In addition to 43 participant interviews, we interviewed 19 staff. Staff interviews include 6 managers (executive directors or managers), 3 staff had roles focused on

in-class education or trades-based training, 4 were support staff (providing one-on-one or group support), and 7 worked on the "construction side" of the organizations. The latter included directors of construction as well as site supervisors (See Table 3.). Staff hailed nearly equally from all participating organizations (See Table 4).

Table 3: WISE Staff Interviews by Role (N=19)	
Management	6
Education / Trades-training	3
Support Staff	7
Construction Staff	7

Table 4: WISE Staff Interviews by Organization	
WISE A	5
WISE B	4
WISE C	5
WISE D	5

Management staff tended to be highly educated, with many seeking careers that had a purpose or social-justice orientation. Support and construction staff were more likely to hail from similar or the same demographics of the participants being served. (As we note in the next section, this is largely a result of internal hiring.) All but 2 staff interviewed worked at their respective organizations for more than a year, and 6 staff worked at their social enterprise for 8 or more years.

In the remainder of this section we describe how the construction social enterprises enrolled in this study were programmatically organized, using the typology we introduced earlier.

The purpose of construction sector social enterprises seems quite straightforward: to support people with barriers to employment to successfully enter the construction sector. But this simplicity is deceptive.

First, pathways into the construction industry can be unclear to outsiders. (This itself may explain why the industry has been found to have high levels of ethnic-based hiring: people hire from within extended networks). Two of the social enterprises in this study have focused their exiting efforts on getting participants "signed on" (/hired) with unions, as unions may provide more stepped approaches to skill and career development.

Part of the difficulty of successful pathways is that employment in the construction sector is cyclical – getting one job is one accomplishment (often the criteria of success for grant reporting for social enterprises). But employment in construction can tend to be short-term jobs, lasting as long as a given construction project. Surviving in the industry means learning how to deal with frequent layoffs, how to become known as a reliable worker, and building a network of both fellow workers and supervisors.

Another issue is that becoming skilled in the sector requires both formal and informal mentorship, as well as both classroom based and job-related training. Certifications, including trades-based apprenticeship "levels," matter for hiring and for the wage workers can command. Learning how to network and form positive working relationships with peers are an essential skills for developing a career. Indeed, after basic certifications, learning these later skills are key to moving up and remaining within the sector.

While funding agreements for training programs focus on the short-term outcome of getting exiting participants hired as a marker of success (perhaps *the* marker of success) staff within construction social enterprises are often working to ensure longer-term success (retention, apprenticeship).

Secondly, because construction social enterprises are working with people with barriers to employment (i.e. not "simply" barriers to construction), the breadth of social and cultural barriers participants are dealing with can far outstrip the technical barriers they may

have to overcome – or, in the case of time-bounded training programs, not line up smoothly within time constraints.

Describing the difficulty of finding a foothold in the construction industry, one SE manager explained that in construction you "earn as you learn" but everything is dependent on if there is work: "If the project comes to an end, they are not earning" (SE Staff 4, 12).

Multiple staff (across all the organizations) noted that obtaining a foothold in the construction industry is something that takes time. While this is true in most careers, in construction it means new entrants can expect many employers, bouts of unemployment and training to become credentialed (i.e. apprenticed). Again, making it outside of general labour in construction requires the ability to network (key to getting jobs and mentorship), manage finances and attend school. A foothold in the industry takes years, not months.

Each organization developed covert and overt ways for participants to prepare to endure future tumultuous periods. For instance, organizations emphasized the importance of adaptability, teamwork and networking throughout their curriculum. This includes coaching to deal with conflict, content that emphasizes "employment etiquette" (calling in sick, showing up on time), and engaging in social events so participants could get to know each other and practice networking skills.

More overt activities aimed at demystifying the construction industry include tours of union halls, training centres, and employer construction sites. One social enterprise offered an "employer showcase" where private employers pitched their company to trainees, highlighting their ethos, projects and earning potential.

Still, probably the largest long-term roadblock to success in the construction sector for participants of construction social enterprises was post-secondary education.

Two challenges make the post-secondary hurdle particularly difficult: it requires a period of unemployment (which can be financially challenging if not prohibitive) and many participants in social enterprise programs have bad experiences in formal education. As noted by a carpentry instructor: "Most people who are here are here because the traditional education system failed them" (SE Staff 3, 3).

Another (white) carpentry instructor agreed, noting that racialized colleagues he trained with did not survive trades school (SE Staff 6, 7).

Although very much outside their control, social enterprises have limited ability to impact the ability of participants to be successful at trades-based classroom training, particularly considering that such training might come up long after someone starts working for a private employer. That said, providing a positive classroom learning experience in their training programs and providing tours of postsecondary institutions were two of the ways social enterprises sought to prepare their participants for longer-term success.

Training programs

Three of the four participating social enterprises had time-bound training programs.

All training programs have an in-class portion (ranging from 2 to 6 weeks) with the bulk of training hours working alongside others in a construction site. Classroom time varies among the programs, but generally, the first three weeks to first month is an intense onboarding process: getting trainees acclimated to the early start time, setting goals, and basic certificates.

Before going to construction sites, trainees take safety training (First Aid/ CPR, fall protection, Tool Safety, WHIMIS, etc), learn about tools and some construction basics, from simple framing to drywall. They will also typically spend time learning construction math. The in-class portion

of training is also the time where support workers will conduct an assessment of their needs, and they will receive additional "life" supports training, such as money management, healthy relationships and the like.

Half or more of the training program is spent at construction sites – either the social enterprises' own site, or on site at another employer and/or as part of a subcontracting team. The site portion of the training programs give participants the opportunity to really see if employment within the sector is for them: construction sites are often loud, and the work requires skills as well as collaboration with others.

During the entire training, support staff and construction staff confer with each other – most organizations engage in case management of each participant – to move participants along a set of defined milestones, or (as the case may be) to allow for participants to improve when or where they are falling short of expectations.

Sometimes trainees have personal issues, sometimes they aren't used to working, and sometimes they don't know how to take initiative. As put by one support worker:

"sometimes a lot of people don't want to talk about what they're going through…and then they lash out and not realize that they lash out" (SE Staff 9, 18).

Even though training programs have a limited number of hours or weeks, most organizations are able to be flexible if people need extended time off: "Sometimes [participants] are trying to catch up on too many barriers at once to be fully present" (SE Staff 3, 23). Time away with a chance to come back after stabilizing their housing or addressing an addiction is practiced at all the social enterprises.

Supported employment

Supported employment includes keeping people past the date their formal training program was

to end or directly hiring someone based on their barriers and/or their membership in an equity-deserving group. All the participating social enterprises had supported employment, with one being an exclusively supported employment venture.

Supported employment programs have the most flexibility and, indeed, are built around flexibility. The reason why supported employment makes sense was put nicely by a SE Staff, whose background was in the construction sector:

"...we're not just placing them and washing our hands and forgetting about it. It's like, to actually break things like the cycle of poverty and to really help people with barriers to be able to, you know, [is] a five year journey... Somebody is not necessarily going to be self-sustained in their employment and in their finances just because they got a good job at a good wage" (SE Staff 8, 5).

Here the SE staff is noting the cyclical nature of employment within the construction sector: getting one's first job in the sector is great, but to survive and move up in training (and wage command), a person needs to be able to get multiple jobs over an extended period. Doing so means securing a good reputation among coworkers, and finding mentors to share their skills. Some people need more time than the time-limited training programs allow.

The construction manager explains:

"Our real goal is to always have enough work for not just the people that are coming out of [training] program and going to be placed, so that...however long they need, but also as a place when people do move on to their apprenticeship, there are gaps in their employment" (SE Staff 8, 4).

There are multiple reasons why a participant finishing a time-based training program is unable to move on – for example, a gap between when the training program ends and

the construction companies are hiring, or when an education program starts, or because the participant is “not ready.” Participants who are not ready to move on may have unresolved social or cultural issues, or need longer to stabilize.

For the social enterprises with a training program, a supported employment program has additional benefits for the financial health of the social enterprise – the longer someone stays on, the more likely they are to be more skilled. The downside is that when earned revenues are down, like other businesses, the social enterprise may need to reduce crew sizes, and it is these participants who are likely to be cut.

The supply of supported employment jobs are few and far between. As put by one training manager: “Our training department produces more trained people than [public housing provider] sends us work for” (SE Staff 3, 17). Support employment jobs, particularly because they are dependent on earned revenue, are often in short supply. Most participants in training programs desire to stay on at the social enterprise long term.

Employment Support

All four organizations provide what is understood as general employment supports (assistance responding to job ads, connecting with employers and updating resumes) as part of the services available to participants while at the organization. Here, by employment support, we mean offering ongoing support to past participants.

Employment support is offered in one of the four participating organizations. After 16 weeks as part of the training program and if for whatever reason the organization cannot take on a participant in their supported employment endeavors, a participant’s file is transferred to what they call their “alumni” program. At this time, now-former participants are employed with another employer or looking for employment. The program provides employment coaches, who are familiar with the

many paths of entry for apprenticeship programs, and offers programming such as a monthly networking event that might feature a former participant who is currently employed who shares their experience and can answer questions newer “alumni” have about how to navigate the journey through apprenticeship.

The program was “born out of the need to help people not fall through the cracks, to stay on track” (SE Staff 4, 5). As the program has developed, each participant is paired with a peer mentor, being matched based on their goals and the union they are part of or their trade (SE Staff 4). The program is exciting, as staff explain it, because “it elongates the amount of time people are really involved with [the SE] even though they are not really here” (SE Staff 4, 9).

In many ways, the alumni program supports a peer-based network that exists for construction workers who have a foothold in the sector.

Although the other social enterprises do not have a formal program, all reported supporting participants after they have formally left the organization. Former participants contact support workers via Facebook profiles set up for the purpose of work, or return to their office. However, the support organizations can offer to former participants are limited, subject, for example, to support workers’ time constraints. One SE Staff noted they will print resumes and procure IDs for participants from up to five years prior.

Conclusion

This section sought to provide a general description of the construction social enterprises engaged in this study, along with a description of participants accessing their programs. We provided a programmatic typology of the social enterprises to highlight some of the differences and interdependencies of the organizations. For instance, supported employment tends to be “self-funded” through earned revenue, while time-limited training programs tend to require government or foundation funding.

Employment support, while only formalized (and funded) at one of the participating social enterprises, is noted as meeting longer-term needs, most pointedly, creating a network and encouraging people to practice networking, a key skill for success within the sector.

All the construction social enterprises in this study work with differently marginalized and racialized people. They have designed and adapted their programs to meet the needs and the barriers experienced by their participants. All use a strengths-based approach, and all develop social innovation to supply participants with an opportunity to enter the trades.

All the construction social enterprises engaged in this study engage in experimental programming – trying new ways of supporting and training participants to enter and (ideally) thrive in the construction industry. We discuss specific innovations in the next section.

02. Issues and Innovations

In this section we outline issues and innovations we identified in the first year of the project. By “issues” we don’t necessarily mean positive or negative things, but rather point to areas of concern and sometimes ambiguity present across the organizations. Some (but not all) of the innovations identified are “answers” to issues that the social enterprises face.

High demand, limited capacity

All social enterprises reported that demand for entry into their training and employment programs significantly outstripped the number of spots they could offer. This is a common problem at social enterprises. A SE manager working out of northern Ontario noted they regularly have 120 applicants for 8 spots (SE Staff 11, 5). The social enterprises in this study described similar demands and constraints.

The issue is often two-fold: to operate, a construction social enterprise must have enough funding to provide adequate supports for the population participating in their program. Funding for the supports needed are not always covered by large government or foundation funders. A social enterprise manager noted that offering a cohort often depends on more than “base” funding for wages and basic training that a large government or foundation grant might provide. Funding from other sources is needed if they want to offer specialized supports, for example to a cohort for refugees or transgendered people (SE Staff 17, 23).

But in addition to adequate funding for supports, the social enterprise must also have enough construction work to provide valuable on-site training. Finding the right mix takes significant logistical planning across staff actors and across many months. As one construction manager said, doing so is often a “tough balance” (SE Staff 8, 5).

“Training dollars,” as the social enterprises describe large government or foundational funded projects, also have cycles of application, approval and reporting that do

not match the social enterprise's fiscal year, the construction sector or educational cycles. However, this is the least of the limitations of funding.

All training programs funded by governments or foundations have imposed criteria for who could be hired into the training program. SE mangers reported they sought to convince funders to fund a wider range of demographics who face barriers to employment or construction.

The Manitoba-based social enterprises received some funding from Employment Income Assistance (EIA), and only people who had a criminal record and were currently on EIA could be accepted. The criteria was prohibitive to people just leaving incarceration, as it could take a number of weeks to get an EIA case number to be able to participate in their training programs. As two participants noted, the criteria of a criminal record seemed to ignore that others from the neighbourhood without a record might desire to get into the trades, and face discrimination or barriers to entry. In the words of one SE Staff, sometimes the "people who are putting these criteria have no idea" (SE Staff 24, 14).

SE managers reported and were witnessed advocating and shaping funding for a wider range of participants.

Purpose and Impact - Supported Employment

As noted in the previous section, supported employment – present in every social enterprise participating in this study – could extend the time a participant was involved and working at the social enterprise. Supported employment offer participants a way to simply "have a job" for a longer period of time, enabling participants to further stabilize.

Supported employment's stabilizing force enables participants and the social enterprise to engage in longer-term planning than training programs allow. This can allow participants to better understand and

prepare for the difficult journey involved in making it past the “general labour” job category (an entry-level, lowest-paid position).

Time in supported employment varied across the organizations. The largest social enterprise sought to limit participant time because demand for a spot at the organization far outstretched capacity. Another used supported employment as a way to successfully bridge people from the training program to employment or school. More than one reported having people on their crews that started as trainees and remained for more than five years. (As we discuss below, this is an internal hiring practice, resulting in the benefit of having crews and support staff that bring experiential knowledge to the organizations.)

Despite demand constraints, all social enterprises are incentivized to keep participants as their skills increase. As participants gain skills and experience, they become valuable members of crews, “crushing” work times and providing mentorship and peer-support to participants who are “fresh” onsite. With margins for jobs being very narrow, and material costs rising, having relatively lower-waged workers who can complete work in a timely manner increased the overall health of the social enterprise.

But a larger related if “unsolvable” problem also exists at the social enterprises: many participants don’t want to leave – this can be true for the training program, but is even more so for supported employment streams, which don’t have predetermined end times.

Staff at social enterprise understood why participants did not want to leave their organizations: participants thrive at social enterprises, where dignity, understanding and mentorship are core organizational practices. For many participants, the construction social enterprises offer a safe workplace and a supportive “family” they haven’t experienced at other workplaces (and for some, at home).

Defining how long a person might need to stay at a social enterprise is highly individualized. Some social enterprise leaders argued that there is a need for a longer-term employer who could accommodate the sometimes bumpy life circumstances that participants were dealing with.

Having a supported employment stream builds in flexibility but can raise participant's desire to stay longer than the organization can accommodate:

"We have to remind them over and over again, [the SE] is not a long-term solution. This is a temporary, this was meant to be a stepping stone in your long-term career," noted one SE Staff member. "[W]e don't have an end date, but I think that's something we might have to explore a little bit more" (SE Staff 5, 13).

SE staff across the organizations spoke at length about coaching participants throughout the training program and while a a crew member to get ready to go elsewhere:

> "We always tell them: we want bigger and better for you....then you come to us in two years and say, 'I'm making more money than you,' right?" (SE Staff 6, 31).

All the social enterprises have developed tiered positions and wage categories for crew members of their supported employment streams. Wages tend to be 3 to 4 dollars lower than workers could earn elsewhere (SE Staff 12, 9). Lower wages are meant to create an incentive to leave (although, these wages were also what the social enterprise could afford.)

SE staff reported that despite the lower wages, participants in supported employment streams preferred to stay: the value of stability, the respectful workplace environment and accommodations provided far outweigh the lower earnings.

SE staff across the construction social enterprises have no consensus on this matter – most can see the need for longer-term participation; and all face the pressure of keeping the organization running via earned income from the social enterprise, which needs skilled staff to achieve sustainability. Some participants need longer to stabilize, and some may always need a supported employment environment according to multiple staff across the participating organizations.

But one issue that haunts supported employment streams is how and who to count as part of the social impact social enterprises create. Keeping participants longer makes the social impact harder to quantify and difficult to articulate – murky. Does one count the social impact of a trainee-cum-crew member who has been working at the social enterprise for ten years? Even more experienced crew members might not make it in the private sector, particularly if they are racialized, a woman, or a member of the LGBTQ2S+ community, so who's to say that their skills recognized in one place will be valued in another?

Moreover, do crew members who moved up from trainee understand that they are beneficiaries of a nonprofit or are they "just employees"? That is, Is it unintentionally pathologizing if an organization includes its longer-term crew members as beneficiaries of their annual reporting?

What are the societal benefits of running a nonprofit social enterprise if the crew members themselves see themselves as employees not people benefiting from a charitable endeavor? In other words, how is the social impact of the social enterprise different from a regular construction company? The day-to-day experiences shared by social enterprise staff suggests answers to these questions are far from straightforward.

Measuring and communicating their impact is thus a related issue. Participating social enterprises that kept good internal stats

admitted that quantifying and communicating impact was a fraught endeavor. Who counts "success" can, unfortunately be politicized and/or overly simplified. For instance, one of the social enterprises had a government funder count anyone that left their training program early to employment as "unsuccessful" (which seems rather mind-boggling given the purpose of the training programs are to get people employed). This bizarre metric continues to haunt the organization in its efforts to secure funding.

Innovations

As much as supported employment streams introduced a host of issues, they also spurred innovation at the social enterprises.

Internally-based hiring

A participant who went from being in the training program to supportive employment – over time moving from being a crew member to being a crew lead or supervisor, brings with them experiential knowledge (understanding what a participant is going through in their first months at the social enterprise). As put by a former trainee who had worked their way into being a lead site supervisor: "[the SE] saved my life (7)….I'm a living testament of what [participants] can do" (SE Staff 18, 16).

The practice of internal hiring meant that over time, the social enterprises developed strong peer-to-peer and mentorship relationships.

Both construction staff and support staff came from within the ranks of participants or from similar circumstances. Workplaces tended to have horizontal power structures. As a support worker explained:

"We [too are] breaking those barriers. We're making those changes in our own families. Because we want different. And we just want to be able to share our positive

experiences with those that are trying to do the same" (SE Staff 6, 7).

Accommodations

Likewise, all the social enterprises had developed an organizational culture with a deep understanding of accommodation, which was both a retention force and one that responded specifically to the needs and life circumstances of participants.

Accommodations could include extended time off but also include later start times for childcare drop offs or additional days away for inservices and the like. SE staff reported accommodations were made for participants to attend addiction treatment, funerals out of town and court dates.

Accommodation needs were noted as responding to barriers participants would face in the "regular" job market. Indigenous participants especially faced barriers related to longer-term accommodation needs. (By-and-large newcomer participants don't have the same needs because many of their families are overseas.) Indeed, staff noted that accommodation was the biggest barrier to being successful at mainstream employers:

"...are [participants] ultimately a good fit for mainstream employment?.... [Participant]'s got skills and he's sable and he shows up every day, but as soon as he gets a job with a mainstream employer, he's facing discrimination....the first time he has a tragedy in his family [and] he needs to be off for three days: Is the company going to be super flexible? What if that happens twice in a month? You know, we have folks that...they are so trauma-adjacent that you see family members dropping left, right and centre. And the amount of time that they would lose working for a mainstream employer, they would lose their job" (SE Staff 14, 11).

At the same time that accommodations could be an ongoing barrier for success at private companies, social enterprises noted their generous accommodation practices led to participants who were incredibly loyal,

suggesting that accommodations turned out to be a key retention strategy (which, as noted above, is both beneficial and a problem). The social enterprises reported they had figured out how to staff their sites in such a way to be able to get the contract done "on time, on budget" even if their crews changed daily.

For social enterprises, supported employment was about building in time for recovery and growth. As put by one executive director: "You have to give [participants] the time and you also have to help them believe that they can be more than what they've been" (SE Staff 16, 12).

Bravery

Social-emotional capacity is slowly being recognized as an integral employment skill, and sometimes it is recognized as an ingredient for innovation. Here, we want to recognize it as both. All the social enterprises encouraged and modeled positive social and emotional behaviors. Chief among them was bravery.

Although the construction industry is infamous for toxic masculinity ("no pain, no gain"), participating in construction social enterprises was an emotional endeavor, and pushed participants.

One SE staff member put it this way:

"emotion is going to come up when people have the opportunity to grow and heal, and if we are doing this to actually create the internal conditions for a person to be successful they need to have the skills to work through those emotional things as well" (SE Staff 19, 11).

Another put it this way:

"Every person who comes in here has their own hurt and their own trauma," (SE Staff 16, 10).

Their ethos – common across all the social enterprises in the study – is to give participants the cultural and emotional tools to allow people to "be able to understand

who you are, your context, but also being able to understand what the context of your hurt is. And recognize that your hurt is not you. The hurt is just the thing that happened to you" (SE Staff 16, 10).

Encouraging participants to try and to be brave in the face of both adversity and future challenges was a message found across all construction social enterprises.

Bravery was not just what participants needed to be successful at the social enterprises, but would serve them in charting a career, especially as a racialized or otherwise marginalized worker in the construction sector.

Bravery was also about having confidence in one's skills and being able to respond, in particular, to discrimination. One support worker described coaching participants to stand up for themselves: noting they want participants "to be confident enough in their skills to take their skills elsewhere" (SE Staff 3, 8) if needed.

Bravery was about being independent and connected to community. As described by one participant, "it's like, you're being led, and you're being...given directions. People are standing by to help you" (SE participant 35, 6).

For both staff and participants, time at the social enterprises was transformative, a change that could be seen in how people held themselves when they start to when they 'graduate' from in-class training. A carpentry instructor reflected on the process:

"There's a difference between when people walk in the door at the beginning and when they walk out the door at the end, I hope. And that is about people trusting the experience. When they walk in...their expectations are varied, but....what I really love to see is like people kind of coming into their own and expressing themselves and developing that independent competence, that independent ability"(SE Staff 19, 5).

Conclusion

This section has described the issues and innovations that construction social enterprises face as they attempt to support successful entry into the construction industry. Working with participants who face significant barriers, construction social enterprises have programmatically developed to keep people employed at their enterprises for various lengths of time to allow participants to gain adequate skills, survive industry downturns and stabilize their lives.

By promoting people internally, social enterprises in this study have staffed their organizations with people who bring significant experiential knowledge to training and supportive employment programs, offering role modeling and peer-support to participants.

Offering accommodations that are often not found in the “mainstream” construction sector both gives people growth opportunities that otherwise would be closed off to them, and develops loyal crew members. Supporting the emotional capacity of adults who’ve experienced multiple forms of trauma to make change, start again and work toward long-term goals involves inculcating a capacity to be brave, including being brave by asking for support.