



Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and Career Development Integrated Efforts: Needs and Opportunities

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1.0 Introduction

The intent of this paper is to identify key issues, needs and opportunities, raised by career development practitioners and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) practitioners that relate to knowledge exchange and cooperative capacity between the two fields. The paper is a legacy document from the 6th *International Forum on Prior Learning Assessment and Qualification Recognition* hosted by the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) in October, 2006 in New Brunswick.

First there will be a brief overview of the current situation of PLAR in relation to the fields of career development and lifelong learning, followed by a description of the results of a focus group activity involving career and PLAR practitioners at the Forum in Fredericton, NB. Next, a number of relevant research reports will be discussed, ending with summary challenges and opportunities for next steps.

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) Knowledge Exchange project led by CAPLA helped to clarify these needs, and to identify priorities to be addressed. Initial issues and topics of interest for knowledge exchange were gained from a focus group of Career Development and PLAR practitioners held at the CAPLA International Forum in Fredericton in October of 2006. The session was included as a concurrent workshop at the Conference, plus additional invitations were sent to local practitioners through the New Brunswick Career Development Action Group (NBCDAG). Over 40 Career and PLAR practitioners from across the country participated in the session, and were enthusiastic about continued communication and cooperation. Outcomes have been identified in a Summary Report from the workshop session and are incorporated within this paper.

A modest amount of additional research was done to put these issues into a broader context. There was neither time nor resources with the production of this paper to cover the steadily increasing volume of research and reports on the topics of PLAR and career development. Accordingly, there is both a need and opportunity for an analytical and synthesis review of existing research in this area which would be of great value to the PLAR and career development communities. It is, however, important to be able to note the increasing emphasis on applied research in this field, and the trend to recognizing the value of partnerships between researchers and practitioners to ensure research is applicable and usable beyond the academic community.

2.0 The current context

As the fields of career development and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) have evolved and matured, common goals and challenges have become more visible. Over the years, practitioners and associations in both fields have collaborated, shared expertise, and worked towards greater professionalism of their specific field of practice. PLAR practitioners and organizations and career development practitioners and organizations have worked together on a project or situational basis, but not in a formalized, integrated manner. Both fields have an extensive reach and impact, and both are fundamental to a range of audiences and other sectors.

The fields share an interest in quality practices to help individuals self-manage their careers and make optimum use of their skills and abilities. Practitioners support individuals' personal development and their participation in the Canadian labour force. It is this shared concern for individual, organizational, and economic growth that brings these communities of practitioners together. The audience of both fields of practice includes new immigrants and refugees as well as Canadian citizens.

There are various issues and trends which make this an opportune time for looking at more formalized cooperative activities between prior learning assessment practitioners and career development practitioners. This paper will highlight a number of issues and trends, identify some opportunities for greater cooperation between the two fields of practice as determined by practitioner feedback and discuss some relevant research.

2.1 The PLAR field

For the purposes of this study, prior learning is considered to be all learning; for what learning of an individual is not 'prior'? Prior learning of an individual is considered to be the holistic view of the learning an individual has drawn from their education, work and life experiences. It is important to note it is the learning drawn from experience that is being identified and later proven, not the 'experience' itself being recognized. Different individuals draw different learning from the same experience. Prior learning of an individual is drawn from formal learning in an educational setting, from non-formal learning in the workplace, and from informal learning through life experiences. The challenge for most individuals is to take the time to reflect on their total learning, to be able to clearly and efficiently identify, articulate and document their learning from all sources, and to then be able to prove learning appropriate to their specific goal or purpose. That is where the practice of PLAR comes in – both to assist the individual in working their way through the process, and to set up quality systems to assess and recognize prior learning.

The field of prior learning covers both qualification recognition (transfer of credit or recognition of credentials or qualifications between institutions, inter-provincially, or internationally), and competency recognition (identifying and assessing knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes) in relation to the needs of the individual. Recognition may be desired for a number of reasons - employment, promotion or job mobility, educational challenge for credit, credentialing, succession planning, learning plans, gap training and immigration, to name a few. The PLAR process is also used on a personal and a professional level and may involve self-assessment and self-recognition of hidden and/or undervalued knowledge, skills and abilities. Such a process benefits the individual, the employer, the community, the economy and society as a whole.

The term prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is not defined the same way by all practitioners, organizations or governments. The evolving term to identify inclusiveness of qualification/credential recognition and competency recognition is recognition of prior learning (RPL), or simply recognition of learning (RL). In this paper, we use the term PLAR in this inclusive manner.

Learners, educational institutions, counselors and employers need tools and training to increase their skills to help identify, document and assess learning. Practitioners and employers need to be able to assess and recognize applicable learning through quality and valid assessment practices.

2.2 PLAR and the Career Development field

Career development and management, at all stages, needs to adopt the principles of PLAR, with its recognition of informal and non-formal learning as well as formal learning.

OECD defines career guidance as “services intended to assist people, of any age and at any point throughout their lives to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. Career guidance helps people to reflect on their ambitions, interests, qualifications and abilities. It helps them to understand the labour market and education systems, and to relate this to what they know about themselves. Comprehensive career guidance tries to teach people to plan and make decisions about work and learning.”¹

The same OECD report goes on to note “In specific terms, these approaches [to lifelong learning] involve a higher proportion of the population attaining initial educational qualifications at upper secondary and tertiary level. They need more flexible pathways to be created through initial education and training. This requires people to have the knowledge and skills to navigate their way through these pathways and to manage their own learning. And the creation of more learner-driven education systems increases the scope for individual choice in learning. Commitments to broad lifelong learning goals require countries increasingly to make it possible for adults to return to learning, with appropriate assessment and recognition of the knowledge and skills acquired through work and experience.”²

Career development covers all ages and stages - youth, adults, employed, unemployed, underemployed, and the ‘3rd age’ adults looking for meaningful work beyond retirement. Career development resources and support for the adult community in Canada is piecemeal and lacking in consistency across the country, as are resources and support for PLAR.

There are important mutual benefits to be gained from stronger knowledge exchange between the PLAR community and career development practitioners (including those involved in both career counseling and employment counseling) in Canada. The career development community consists of large numbers of front-line practitioners who are already involved with clients of all ages on a daily basis. Within the ‘mutual tool box’ used in both fields, one can find common activities to identify transferable skills, ways to document and prove competencies, self-marketing strategies, resumé

¹ OECD *Career Guidance and Public Policy: Bridging the Gap* OECD 2004 p19

² OECD Ibid p22

writing, portfolio development, labour market information and goal setting. These processes strongly align the fields of practice, however formal linkages across the communities and opportunities for knowledge exchange and knowledge transfer have remained weak.

2.3 PLAR and Human Resource Management

Employers and human resource management practitioners are not often considered as part of the career development community. However, Canada is facing an increasing labour shortage, and demographics show the trend as continuing. Employers need to understand the purpose and process of PLAR - particularly competency profiling - in order to assist their process of selection, maximize the skill pool of their employees, and assist with retention. Communication and understanding amongst career development counsellors, employment counsellors and employers (including human resource management professionals) will become increasingly important to maximize the potential of our complete labour force.

Links between the HR Professionals, the PLAR community, and the career development community are beginning through projects such as CAPLA's Knowledge Exchange project, but continued opportunities for knowledge exchange and professional development opportunities are necessary.

2.4 PLAR and Lifelong Learning

Continuous learning is a basic requirement for all adults in today's ever- changing world. The sphere of adult learning is continuously expanding in terms of the interplay between formally, informally and non formally- acquired learning. The lines are blurring and competency-based assessment is gaining popularity as a way of determining what people know and can do. There is a need for more appropriate systems, frameworks and policies for Canada to be seen as a leader in the recognition of learning. The need to do so is particularly acute if Canada expects to attract and retain internationally trained immigrants and their families.

The slow, but growing recognition of all sources of learning and the increasing push for recognition is forcing systems and policy makers (public and private) around the world to consider broader qualifications frameworks that include recognition of learning beyond formal learning. The increasing mobility of people between countries and continents who seek education and employment is also developing a grassroots push for a new framework of assessing and recognizing all learning. Canada itself lacks a national Qualification Framework.

Kathleen Flanagan, Coordinator of the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre of the Canadian Council on Learning, presented the Closing Plenary to CAPLA's 6th International Forum on Prior Learning Assessment and Qualification Recognition held in Fredericton in October of 2006. She noted 'the tragedy of under-recognized and under-utilized knowledge and capacities of individuals' and how PLAR can help

address this. She mentioned the great increases in access to post-secondary education in the 1960's through a major development of systems and infrastructure. She believes adult learning is at the same critical juncture where "we will soon see the growth of an infrastructure with programs, policies, guidelines and recognition for the value and significance of lifelong learning"³.

3.0 CAPLA's Knowledge Exchange Project

CAPLA's Knowledge Exchange project through the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) involved the PLAR community, the Career Development community, and the Human Resource (HR) Management community. Project Partners with CAPLA in the CCL project were:

- o CCDF (Canadian Career Development Foundation)
- o CCC (Canadian Career Consortium)
- o CCLB (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks)
- o IPMA-Canada (International Personnel Management Association – Canada).

The work was completed through CAPLA's www.Recognitionforlearning.ca (RFL) initiative, with two Steering Committees directing it (one for the work with career development and PLAR and one for human resource management and PLAR). The project:

- o identified PLAR applicability to Career Development and HR activities
- o identified existing and potential connections and knowledge exchange priorities between these communities
- o provided limited e-learning (live webcasts which were then archived for ongoing access) and online exchange resources and activities, based on priorities of the field.

3.1 Outcomes of the Fredericton Focus Group Session

CAPLA's 6th international Forum on Prior Learning Assessment and Qualification Recognition in Fredericton in October, 2006 provided the venue for career PLAR practitioners to come together for a focus group.

Participants attending the Forum who attended this particular workshop session, along with other invited career practitioners in the community concurred with the idea that all learning counts – no matter how or where it was acquired. They noted that many individuals do not recognize the depth and breadth of their own learning and have not reflected on the learning they have gained through informal and non-formal means. For many, the only learning they feel is valued is formal learning through educational institutions. Individuals can be helped to identify their current knowledge, skills and abilities/attitudes; how best to define their learning; how to recognize the extent and depth of their learning, and how to prove that learning exists in relation to their specific employment or educational goal. To do this, educational institutions,

³ Kathleen Flanagan nd : <<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Newsroom/Articles/CAPLAClosing.htm>> Canadian Council on Learning May 2007

counselors and employers need tools and training to increase their professional skills to help clients/learners to identify, document and self-assess their learning. If recognition of learning is to be meaningful, then valid, rigorous, reliable, fair and authentic assessment processes have to be in place.

The Fredericton focus group discussed career development and PLAR as an emerging professional partnership. The potential of significant individual capacity building was noted, based on improvements in setting appropriate learning goals within an improved framework of labour market and social goals and through innovative and streamlined methods of PLAR and career planning. Career development & PLAR together can help build motivation, hope, and confidence, increase participation in learning & relearning, help reach the vulnerable, and are foundations for a coherent lifelong learning and personal career management system.

General consensus was that a greater communication and sharing between the two communities would be very valuable, and could provide efficiencies of practice. The group strongly supported being able to carry through with the synergy and actions initiated at the CAPLA conference, through:

1. discussion groups on topics of interest;
2. sharing of resources and ideas - ongoing network;
3. looking at commonalities in practice and practitioner competencies of PLAR/Career practitioners;
4. access to professional development and training; and
5. recognition/certification of PLAR and Career Development Practitioners.

Feedback from the group as to needs and opportunities focused on the following categories:

1. Greater Awareness of PLAR is needed for many audiences.
 - a) There is a great need for increased general awareness about PLAR, what it is and what it isn't. This is needed in the workplace (employers, supervisors and employees) and in career development and related fields
 - b) There is a need for standard terminology concerning PLAR in plain, understandable language, as the meaning of terms varies between institutions, organizations and jurisdictions, resulting in difficulty in understanding or varying perceptions of written and oral communication for both practitioners and learners/clients.
 - c) There is a need for awareness of, and professional development in, PLAR process and assessment options beyond the portfolio process.
 - d) There is a need for greater connection between PLAR and human resource management, and in educating employers and HR associations about the connectivity between the fields.
2. Stakeholder engagement (particularly in the workplace) needs to be increased to achieve particular outcomes:

- a) Sharing of resources and approaches to engage stakeholders (particularly employers) to participate in PLAR/career development, and to integrate it into their ongoing practices.
 - b) Sharing of efforts to encourage participation of all levels of the workforce in PLAR and in continuing career management.
 - c) Ensure maximum PLAR benefits when working with a multicultural workforce (when it is difficult for employers to recognize credentials).
3. Practitioner competencies/standards, recognition/certification and training are key issues for both PLAR & career development practitioners:
- a) National Standards and Guidelines are needed for PLAR practitioners, and the National Standards and Guidelines developed for career development practitioners need to be supported and updated as necessary.
 - b) PLAR certification for various roles should be made available (i.e. for advisors, assessors and facilitators).
 - c) Credentialing of career practitioners is needed for professional recognition
 - d) Endorsed training based on national standards and leading to certification is needed for both PLAR and career development practitioners.
 - e) Identification of common competencies between PLAR and career development practitioners for transferable recognition would be efficient and valuable to the complementary nature of the two fields.
 - f) Training for practitioners in both fields is required in culturally relevant processes and resources for aboriginals and those from other countries.
 - g) Training in Portfolio development and use is required; both portfolios for clients/employees, and professional portfolios for Career Practitioners.
4. Resources and training needs to be supported in a number of areas:
- a) PLAR as a process that is manageable and efficient in various situations.
 - b) PLAR in multicultural context.
 - c) PLAR in the workplace (customization and resources).
 - d) Developing learning plans.
 - e) Helping staff (supervisors/employers) teach career goals.
 - f) Applying career practitioner skills within PLAR process.
 - g) Applying PLAR practitioner skills within the career development process.
 - h) Quality standards of practice in PLAR.
5. Difficulties and confusion arise for practitioners and learners/clients because of:
- a) The range of PLAR policies and procedures within and between institutions and jurisdictions, with no established guidelines or benchmarks.
 - b) The lack of standards/guidelines for tools and resources within provinces and between jurisdictions.
6. PLAR in the workplace is a key area that needs to be developed, particularly in reference to:
- a) PLAR to identify and document workplace essential skills.

- b) PLAR and workforce linkages amongst practitioners (workplace, human resource management, PLAR and career development).
 - c) PLAR and career development training in the workplace for employers, supervisors and human resource management professionals.
 - d) Helping employers and human resource management professionals profile employees' knowledge, skills and abilities, develop training plans, help staff teach career goals, encourage participation, engage, and make the process manageable.
7. PLAR in personal development/employment preparation:
- a) Using PLAR with low literacy learners
 - b) Identifying Essential skills - particularly with low literacy individuals
 - c) Helping clients without degrees/certificates enter the workforce
 - d) Using PLAR for at risk youth and adults
 - e) Using PLAR with new immigrants and refugees
8. The need for research, in areas such as:
- a) Research on employment outcomes (track those who have used PLAR)
 - b) Guidelines or Standards for PLAR Policy and Procedures
 - c) Competency profiling and Human Resource Practices using PLAR in the workplace

Some good practice examples of integration of PLAR in career development practices were noted by the group to use for communication opportunities with a broader audience.

Individual feedback through various conversations with practitioners and online discussion supported the needs identified in the Fredericton focus group.

4.0 Research Findings

The limited web research undertaken provided complementary findings to the feedback from the focus group.

4.1 The importance of PLAR to lifelong and lifewide learning

Governments, organizations and individuals have now accepted the fact that learning never stops. As well, there is a continuous need for new learning. Throughout our lives we continue to need to learn new things and to re-learn others. As the pace of change increases, so must our learning.

As well as the acceptance of continuous learning, there is a greater acceptance that all learning counts, no matter where or how it was learned. Formal (classroom institutional learning), informal (through life and work experience) or non-formal learning (acquired on the job), should be recognized if it can be proven against a required standard. As well, there is growing recognition of the personal and economic cost of NOT recognizing the related learning of individuals. The

Conference Board of Canada's 2001 research entitled *Brain Gain*⁴ reflects upon the cost of non-recognition, stating that more than 540,000 individuals in Canada would stand to gain an average of \$8,000 -12,000 each year from improved learning recognition. The study indicates the three groups who would gain the most are immigrants, people with prior learning gained through work and training, and transferees between post-secondary learning institutions, or in the case of licensed professions, between provinces.

According to the Government of Canada's 2002 *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians*⁵ report, by 2004 more than 70 percent of all new jobs created in Canada will require some form of post-secondary education, and 25 percent of new jobs will require a university degree. Only 6 percent of new jobs will be held by those who have not finished high school. The report also noted that more than half of the workforce of 2015 is already in the workforce, and that as early as 2011, all increases in labour force participation will come from immigration.

Add to these concerning statistics the findings of the report *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency* from the Canadian Council on Learning in 2007 regarding the low literacy level of many in our society. The report states that more than 4 in 10 Canadian adults cannot read, write, do arithmetic or solve problems at the level required to participate fully in today's economy. They need literacy and essential skills upgrading to reach at least the high school graduation level if they are to be able to fill the jobs of today and tomorrow.

David Livingstone's national survey on informal learning in 2004 identified "Fuller recognition of Canadian adults' prior informal learning could contribute to substantially greater participation in adult education and training. More than half of all Canadians and even greater numbers of the employed would be more likely to enroll in adult education if their previous informal learning were recognized. More than two-thirds of racial minorities, recent immigrants and younger school dropouts all express a high interest in enrolment in adult education and training if their prior informal learning were recognized."⁶

The great need for lifelong learning is clear. The question remains as to how we can make the continued lifelong learning most efficient for individuals, for organizations/institutions and for society. Without the use of PLAR to identify current skill levels and without the capacity to compare them to workplace competency job profiles, training/learning could be duplicative, costly and inefficient. With this high interest and critical need for recognition of prior learning from all sources, it is essential that career development practitioners make maximum use of PLAR, can provide or refer to quality PLAR services, and can help to maneuver their clients through the sometimes disconnected system of recognition of learning, gap training

⁴ M Bloom and M. Grant *Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognizing Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada*. The Conference Board of Canada 2001.

⁵ *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians* Human Resources Development Canada, Government of Canada 2002

⁶ D.W. Livingstone, M Raykov and C Turner *Canadian Adults' Interest in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): A National Survey* 2005

and competency matching. Individuals need help to identify their learning and to identify skills gaps where further learning is needed.

Learning recognition research suggests that PLAR services remain seriously underdeveloped in most educational institutions (Thomas, Collins & Plett, 2001), and that the major beneficiaries to date have been already admitted college students who have enthusiastically used PLAR to complete programs more quickly (Aarts et al, 1999). PLAR in the workplace has not made much progress, with the possible exception of the military.

Christine Wihak, in her 'PLAR State of the Field Review'⁷ for the Canadian Council on Learning, reports "The achievement of PLAR credits appears to have predictive validity for ability to engage successfully in and persist with post-secondary learning. PLAR can itself be a powerful learning tool, especially the process of portfolio development: Research with post-secondary learners who have used PLAR uniformly reports benefits in terms of time and costs savings, as well as growth in self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence".

The need for continuous learning, the challenges of low literacy, limited English language competency of immigrants, the need for continuous upgrading and upskilling of the current workforce, along with issues surrounding early high school leavers and barriers facing Aboriginal individuals all point to an increased need for using PLAR as a part of quality career development services. A stronger connection between the PLAR and career development communities is well warranted.

Both career development and prior learning assessment facilitators look at the person in a holistic manner and assist individuals to reflect on and document their strengths and abilities from all types of learning experiences. Practitioners become guides by assisting their clients to become aware of their preferred futures as they move through a life of continuous career and life changes.

The term 'career guidance' is being used in some jurisdictions to refer to services intended to assist individuals, of any age, to make educational, training, and occupational choices and to manage their careers. It can be viewed as a form of brokerage between the needs of the individual, society, and the economy as it involves individuals participating and determining their role within society and the economy.

4.2 Using quality PLAR practice in Career Development Practice

In their paper *The twinning of potential: Toward an integration of prior learning assessment with career development*.⁸ . Peruniak and Welch put forward that

"prior learning assessment (PLA) is an integral part of the field of career development. In forging closer ties between these areas, each stands to enrich the other. Presently both PLA and career development are seeking to

⁷ Christine Wihak *PLAR State of the Field Review* Canadian Council on Learning 2006

⁸ GS Peruniak, & D Welch "The Twinning of Potential: Toward an Integration of Prior Learning Assessment with Career Development". *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 34 (3), 232 - 245. 2000.

set national standards, discussing the certification of practitioners, and developing education and training agendas (Day, 1999; National Steering Committee Career Development Guidelines and Standards, 1998; 1999). In suggesting a closer union between PLA and career development our hope is for a more integrated approach.”

Although Peruniak and Welsh limit their definition of PLA to that of looking for educational credit for informal learning, they do look at similarities of purpose and complementary approaches between PLA and career development. They note “Both PLA and career development focus on processes to help individuals achieve greater potential. Yet while the focus for PLA has been on nontraditional testing and assessment, career development has in the past largely followed a norm-based testing and measurement tradition.... Finally, while the methods of PLA emphasize reflection on the learning derived from life experience, career development has largely emphasized reflection on the results from vocational interest inventories, ability scales, and personality inventories.” They conclude that “PLA can be seen as an important specialty within career development.”

When looking at the broader definition of PLAR used in this paper, we see that it relates in a very strong manner to career development and its processes.

Phil Jarvis from the National Career/Life Centre suggests that a knowledge economy demands new approaches to career management at all stages of life.⁹ Not only does he indicate that mastery of career management skills cannot be left to chance, but he believes that “career management skills cannot be learned solely from printed publications and websites. Human support in the learning process is essential, as it is during times of voluntary and involuntary career transitions.”

He states “The old vocational guidance model was about helping people make [one time] informed career decisions”, whereas the new career management model is about helping people become healthy, self-reliant citizens, able to cope with constant change in rapidly changing labour markets and maintain balance between life and work roles.” Jarvis indicates cornerstones of the career management paradigm are what is known as the high five principles, being:

- 1) “Know yourself, believe in yourself and follow your heart.
- 2) Focus on the journey, not the destination. Become a good traveler.
- 3) You’re not alone. Access your allies, and be a good ally.
- 4) Change is constant, and brings with it new opportunities.
- 5) Learning is life-long. We are inquisitive by nature, and most alive when we’re learning.”

Jarvis further indicates that in the career building process, the questions needed to help ‘direct’ an individual are:

- 1) “Who are you now, and what do you love to do?”

⁹ Phil Jarvis, *Career Management Paradigm Shift: Prosperity for Citizens, Windfalls for Governments* 2003 p3-4

- 2) What are your special talents and skills, or gifts?
- 3) What types of situations and environments have special appeal for you?
- 4) What types of organizations need what you can offer better than others?
- 5) What innovative work arrangements will suit you and potential employers?"

To be able to answer the questions above, an individual needs to know themselves, be able to clearly identify what they know and can do, identify what they want to do and be able to market themselves to others (i.e. prove their learning). These are the first stages of PLAR. The 'R' of recognition is then the outcome of hiring, promotion, course or credential credit recognition, entry to education, training programs or professional/trades certification, or simply self understanding and confidence. The PLAR process is used in career development to help an individual identify, document and be able to prove their skills and abilities. It is a key component of career development activities at various stages.

5.0 Using PLAR in the workplace

The whole perspective toward employment is changing. 'Career' is increasingly being viewed as something every human has, for a lifetime (Gysbers, 1997). The concepts "job" and "occupation" are anachronisms in many industry sectors, while in others they form the basis for identification of competencies and job profiles. Nevertheless, terms such as these remain the cornerstone of career information systems and databases, guidance processes and post-secondary education and training offerings. "Work is now defined not by occupational titles or categories, but by skills and values. Effective career builders know how to shape and build their careers, project by project. This is a new competency, still largely unrecognized by most adults in the workforce." (Straby, 2002).

The increasing emphasis on essential skills and common competencies from entry level through to management reflect the trend to greater mobility within the workforce, and the importance of individuals being able to identify transferable skills. It is increasingly difficult for companies to retain employees. Helping employees to 'build a career' within a company is one of the strategies through which corporations can retain individuals for a longer period. People want to continue to learn; but they also want the recognition for the ongoing learning, and the ability to move into new challenges. Again, PLAR needs to be integrated with workplace learning systems and philosophies to gain maximum benefit for individuals and employers.

It should be noted that within this context, career development for employees is an essential component of human resource management.

6.0 Challenges and Opportunities Summary

Given the importance and relevance of PLAR to the broad field of career development, what are the identified key needs, challenges and opportunities?

The connections, challenges and opportunities identified to effectively use PLAR in career development practices (including human resource management) fall into five main categories:

6.1 PLAR awareness.

There is a need for greater awareness and understanding of PLAR - its full meaning, its benefits and how it can be used in career development, human resource management, and in the workplace in general. (This often extends to education and training institutions and organizations). Stakeholder engagement is a related area of concern. The requirement for a standard lexicon of terminology regarding PLAR, in plain language, is a high priority.

The meaning, extent, processes and benefits of PLAR are not well known or understood. Specific applications such as portfolio development and/or challenge for academic credit seem to dominate the public's perception. PLAR is much more.

Experts from across Canada and abroad have helped shape the look and substance of what PLAR in Canada has become. They have worked to build a culture for adult learning and recognition, in order to facilitate social inclusion, individual growth, equity and economic prosperity for all. PLAR can help individuals identify their knowledge, skills and abilities for personal understanding and self confidence, for identifying learning gaps, for employment and career purposes, for promotion and mobility, for educational credit or program access, or for entry to the country. PLAR can help businesses and organizations identify and make maximum use of their full human capital as well as assist with succession planning. Communities have made use of PLAR to identify their assets and move forward with new opportunities. Industry sectors make use of PLAR to identify transferable skills and for certification purposes (without necessarily referring to it as PLAR). Governments could make greater use of PLAR within their own HR systems, through recruitment and retention strategies. In terms of public policy, PLAR could be supported as an integral part of labour force development.

Many organizations and individuals use a form of PLAR without calling it PLAR, necessitating the need to reference the process rather than the term.

PLAR is used with individuals to identify, prove and recognize their learning, through a full range of processes and assessment options. It could be through transfer of academic credit (within Canada or from foreign institutions), institutional recognition/articulation with industry training, or proving learning through authentic assessment tools, demonstrations, portfolios, challenge tests, interviews, or a range of other flexible assessment options.

PLAR is used by organizations and institutions to recognize the learning of those who have completed an institutional or industry course or training program. PLAR is also used in organizations and businesses to identify informally learned knowledge and skills to assist with recruitment, selection, mobility, learning plans and succession planning.

PLAR is used with internationally trained individuals through both qualifications recognition and competency assessment, both of which take on greater importance if credential assessment is not possible or incomplete.

Some suggestions of topics related to awareness were:

- o Make connections of PLAR to other fields of practice;
- o Identify PLAR processes and benefits to the individual and the economy;
- o Promote the benefits of using PLAR with diverse audiences (low literacy and at risk learners, new immigrants, English as an Additional Language learners, '3rd agers' and others);
- o Discuss how to engage stakeholders;
- o Position competency assessment and recognition as a complement to credential recognition.

One item stressed by practitioners in all fields is the need for a common, accepted lexicon of terminology related to PLAR. There has been work done in the Career Development field, resulting in a "Common Career Language Matrix"¹⁰ and a Matrix Companion Guide, developed in Alberta¹¹. This same concept would be useful for PLAR related terminology. This same issue has surfaced with a PLA International Network Working Group being led by CAPLA, identified by them as one of the key needs internationally, to develop an agreed upon lexicon of terms related to the recognition of learning. Even key terms such as PLAR, certification, and qualification are not defined in the same manner by everyone in the field, making it even more challenging for those individuals wanting to make use of PLAR.

6.2 Professional development in Quality PLAR practices.

Focus group feedback and research papers have recommended the following for maximizing benefits of PLAR within career development practices:

- o Identification and understanding of what is involved in quality PLAR practice.
- o Identification and communication of good practices examples.
- o Standards of practice and how quality PLAR practices can enhance the service delivery of career development practices.
- o The extensive need for guidelines, tools, resources, sharing of expertise and training. Training needs to be extended beyond just those who identify themselves as career development practitioners, as a great many people who work in related fields are involved in some aspects of career guidance.
- o Development of guidelines and/or standards for PLAR resources and tools. Because people in the field have found such a range of tools, they are not sure how to identify the best ones for their use. This would also assist in efficiency as new tools would not need to be continuously developed.

¹⁰ Found at www.careerdevelopment.ab.ca/matrix

¹¹ Developed by Kristen Cumming and Colleen Smith with support from Alberta Human Resources and Employment. February 2005

Some specific training needs identified include:

- o Greater understanding of what is involved in a quality PLAR process, and the need for more developed quality standards of practice for PLAR.
- o How to identify and develop manageable, efficient and effective processes for PLAR, including alternatives to the portfolio.
- o Understand what is accepted as evidence (of learning) and how is evidence and proof of learning is assessed (for various methods of PLAR).
- o How to help clients develop portfolios (& types of portfolios), including competency-based portfolios, and e-portfolios.
- o Using PLAR in a multicultural, global workplace.
- o Dealing with varying PLAR policies and procedures between jurisdictions and between institutions.
- o Using PLAR with at risk populations.
- o Assessing language competency and essential skills/employability skills competency within PLAR.

6.3 Professional recognition for practitioners.

There is a desire for formal professional recognition for both PLAR and career development practitioners, including a PLAR process incorporated into the recognition process. The opportunity for voluntary certification for both career development practitioners and PLAR practitioners was noted. The comparison of competencies of PLAR and career development practitioners, and the possibility of a common competency cluster that would be transferable and recognized in both fields is of key interest and an opportunity which should be acted upon.

Throughout the recommendations in the OECD Canada country report on Career Guidance Policies¹², there is emphasis on the importance of providing clarification of roles and training of staff in career development services. High praise is given to the Standards and Guidelines for the Career Development Practitioner as a basis for training and quality practice in the field.

Just as the OECD report suggests that future information on career paths should include ways of basing labour market information (LMI) for all individuals more on skills and competencies than on occupations (paragraphs 66-67), the importance of identifying and recognizing the required competencies for good practice in career development (including PLAR) is highlighted.

This is an opportune time to look at identifying common transferable skills in the area of PLAR practice that can be recognized by both the PLAR and career development communities. It makes sense to identify and recognize clusters of transferable skills between fields when there is a great deal of cross-over of roles and responsibilities.

The career development community has national Standards and Guidelines as an accepted, widely validated set of competencies to define the areas of common

¹² *Review of Career Guidance Policies. Canada Country Note* OECD September 2002

competencies and specialization areas for the Career Development Practitioner.¹³ Although the competencies of a PLAR practitioner have not been as clearly validated by the PLAR community, there are some key documents to use as a basis. CAPLA developed a set of Benchmarks for the Canadian PLAR Practitioner¹⁴ (for the roles of Advisor and Assessor) through extensive consultation in 2000. In 2002¹⁵, Red River College in Winnipeg, Manitoba completed a DACUM process for the work of a PLAR practitioner which added competencies for the role of facilitator to those of advisor and assessor. In 2005, CAPLA's www.RecognitionforLearning.ca online community of practice worked with Mohawk College as a partner along with a national Steering Committee, to further develop the competency profile of a PLAR practitioner. Competency listings were developed (using the CAPLA Benchmarks, the RRC DACUM profile, and international research as a basis), providing a listing of common competencies for a PLAR practitioner, plus those specialty competencies for the roles of advisor, assessor and facilitator/coordinator. Although these competency listings still need to go through a process of validation to be accepted nationally, they form a strong basis for initial consultation with the career development community on common competencies.

To date, Quebec and Alberta are the only provinces who offer certification for Career Development Practitioners, and BC is looking at a model as well. There has been much informal discussion in the PLAR community about potential voluntary certification, but there is a need for resources to validate the Standards before developing a certification process.

Identifying a common competency cluster would allow opportunities for joint training and joint recognition, thus providing efficiencies and greater credibility for both fields.

6.4 Support required to maintain momentum and development of both fields.

There is a need for leadership and coordination in each practitioner community, and between the fields, both from a policy and a resource perspective. The need is for ongoing support and funding to coordinate the efforts of PLAR, not simply project funding which does not allow for a continuous building process or systemic change.

OECD also indicates a need for a “stronger structure to house the further development and implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners; ... for bringing co-ordination, cohesion and leadership to the career development field”.

As well as the practical side of using PLAR in career development practice, there is an identified need in terms of leadership, support and commitment to PLAR and career development within the framework of public policy and program support.

¹³ *Standards and Guidelines for the Career Development Practitioner*

¹⁴ Malcolm Day and Paul Zakos *Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition-Practitioner Perspectives. Guidelines for the Canadian PLAR Practitioner.* . CAPLA 2000

¹⁵ Red River College is renewing the DACUM in 2007.

PLAR in Canada has been part of various federal government and provincial government initiatives over the years, but has not had consistent or ongoing support. Organizations such as CAPLA and to a lesser extent the former Canadian Labour Force Development Board had to rely on project funding to support their PLAR programs through project funding. This situation does not provide a clear message on the part of government as to the importance of PLAR and its role in career development and human resource management. Nor does it offer the opportunity for industry buy-in, community awareness or grass roots leadership.

The OECD country report on Canada regarding Career Guidance Policies¹⁶ indicates “Hitherto, much of the strategic leadership in the career development field at national level has come from HRDC, working with a number of key community partners. Bodies like the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) and the National Life/Work Centre (NLWC) have played important roles. It seems significant, however, that HRDC’s support for co-ordination and leadership activities appear to have been stronger and more systemic in the area of labour market information than in the wider field of career development”.

With greater operational support for national organizations of PLAR practitioners and of career development practitioners, a stronger platform for continued coordinated efforts and efficiencies between the two fields of practice could be established.

6.5 Applied Research.

There is a need for additional research of value to practitioners, such as longitudinal studies of PLAR participants, including employment outcomes.

People identify with stories and experiences of other people. For many of us, hearing from others helps us decide on our own course of action and to see if it might be applicable or beneficial to us before deciding if we will move along a certain path or use a specific process. Qualitative studies of PLAR participants would be valuable.

Many people in both the career development and PLAR fields have identified the lack of applied research in areas of PLAR, to utilize in decision-making, systems development (policies, procedures and processes), and resource/tools development. There have been limited longitudinal research studies on the use of PLAR for different purposes with various audiences to explore the benefits and return on investment. More is needed to identify measurable outcomes, and to produce some evidence of the processes and benefits of PLAR services in Canada for individuals, institutions, communities and governments.

Peruniak and Welsh state “Theory in experiential learning and in turn PLA began showing up in the literature in the early 1970’s and is therefore more recent than career development theory. PLA, as a relatively new educational innovation, has been concerned with issues of implementation, service delivery, and budget survival

¹⁶ *Review of Career Guidance Policies. Canada Country Note* OECD September 2002

and has not yet developed a base of empirical research comparable to that found in the field of career development.”¹⁷ Although there has been some research in the last few years through CAPLA and the Centre for Education and Work at OISE (Work and Lifelong Learning project), much more is needed.

Christine Wihack, in her “PLAR State of the Field Review”¹⁸ for the Canadian Council on Learning in 2006, identified major gaps in knowledge related to the field. She put forward an extensive listing of most profitable lines of future inquiry ranging from PLAR Policy and its position within the adult learning policy framework, experience of faculty members and learners, costs and benefits of PLAR, a census of PLAR practitioners and effectiveness and efficiency of PLAR training, and workplace PLAR activities in different occupational fields, as well as experience of diverse learners with PLAR.

Today, a greater emphasis on partnerships between qualified researchers and practitioner organizations as a criteria for funding has started to spawn interest in more empirical research studies. Both qualitative and quantitative studies related to the benefits and process of PLAR, individual growth and advancement, efficiency of learning systems and opportunities, and labour market outcomes are needed. There are many connections here to the field of career development.

Recent symposia have highlighted the need for public policy to be guided by evidence pertaining to the efficacy of career development practice. A consistent theme that emerged from both Symposia was the need to develop effective systems for gathering data concerning the impact of career development/career guidance services on a number of levels, such as individual well-being, social inclusion, and economic development. Furthermore, participants in both symposia discussed the need for data to inform and influence public policy related to the provision of career services.”¹⁹ There are many specific claims made about the contributions that quality career development services can make, as well as the process of PLAR within career development services. The challenge is in proving these claims.

Funding for service delivery is increasingly linked to demonstration of results. As well, any practice requires outcome evidence to be able to look at continuous improvement practices, and the professionalism (providing increased credibility) of its field. .

There is a great need for in depth research in both quantitative and qualitative forms. This research would provide a greater empirical basis for continued and improved services to individuals, improvement of systems, and formulation of policy and

¹⁷ Peruniak & Welsh, Ibid

¹⁸ Christine Wihack, Ibid

¹⁹ Canadian Research Working Group for evidence-based practice in career development (CRWG). The State of Practice in Canada in Measuring Career Service Impact: A CRWG Report . CCDF December 2005

procedures. Connecting PLAR to some career development research would be of value to both communities.

7.0 Conclusion

Career development practitioners help the individual set goals, explore their interests and competencies, identify job preferences, understand the labour market and find work. These same activities are at the heart of many PLAR practices. By helping an individual identify, describe, and prove their knowledge, skills and abilities they are empowering the individual to look at and manage their own careers. Career development practitioners can also assist their clients to maneuver through the complex web of labour market information, of credential and competency requirements in various sectors, and of recognition and assessment systems. Career development practitioners either practice PLAR, or they refer clients to PLAR practitioners for more in depth assistance depending on the situation.

Key issues identified by both career development and PLAR practitioners revolve around the need for professional development (often with particular topics in common), knowledge and resource sharing and exchange, and the desire to have their own professional competence assessed and recognized. There is much that can be accomplished in working together.

Some initial steps have been taken through a Canadian Council on Learning Knowledge Exchange project led by CAPLA, which brought the two communities together to initiate identification of needs, to share some tools, and to present some online learning opportunities for practitioners through pilots using discussion forums, webcasting and podcasting.

A strategy for formal and sustained partnerships and cooperative actions will be needed to ensure efficiency and effectiveness of exchanges.

There are great benefits to be gained with continued and more formalized knowledge exchange and cooperative practice between those involved in PLAR and those in the field of career development. The opportunity and the interest is there; the need is for financial support and commitment to the value of a national adult learning strategy encompassing both fields of practice.

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