

Rural Community Training and Education Needs Assessment Survey Summary East Central Alberta

Executive Summary

A rural community needs assessment survey regarding adult education and training was developed and administered by the Alberta Rural Development Network (ARDN) in partnership with the Battle River Training Foundation (BRTF). There were 173 surveys completed by people in East Central Alberta. The majority of respondents were working age, 25-64 (85%), and 81% of respondents were women. A high percentage (82%) had some level of post-secondary education.

There was not much awareness of BRTF and its work (only 53%) and nearly half did not know what courses were offered in their community. However, 89% said there was a benefit to offering courses locally.

In-person workshops or classes are preferred over online courses. Where online courses are offered, the preference is for them to be unscheduled so the individual can fit it into their own time. Two barriers to online training that were identified: 1. lack of computer skills 2. lack of high speed internet.

The majority wanted more access to business and computer courses with human services courses (healthcare, psychology) coming a close third. In another section, business courses were preferred by 71% of respondents, trades by 60% and healthcare by 49%. Business courses most wanted in the region are financial services (50%), accounting (41.5%) and management (41%).

Seventy percent of employers would be more willing to send staff for training if it were offered locally. Courses they most want their staff to take are: office/business admin (15 of 47), customer service (8 of 47) and class 1 driving and airbrakes (6 of 47). Courses that employers wanted for themselves include time management (57%), supervisory skills (52%), accounting (50.5%) and marketing (49.5%).

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Get more feedback from men and people with a variety of educational backgrounds.
2. Use a variety of methods to collect data, e.g. print surveys available in community offices and at community events, focus groups.
3. Create more awareness of the survey across demographic groups through an email fan out and/or promotional campaign.
4. BRTF needs to create more awareness in the region.
5. Find new ways to publicize BRTF; e.g. an email fan out, sending information home with school children or having information available in the workplace.
6. Bring more in-person workshops and classroom teaching to the community.
7. Keep online learning unscheduled so people can adapt it to their own schedules.
8. Compile and promote workshops, courses and classes offered locally.
9. Partner with other learning-based organizations to bring more courses to the region.
10. Promote local courses and workshops through local media, municipal and partner websites, and other places.
11. Offer some courses such as customer service or time management as in-person workshops delivered in the community.

12. Explore offering longer term courses such as office administration or management in a combination of online or classroom delivery in the community.

Community Needs Assessment Summary: East Central Alberta

Goal

To determine community needs regarding adult education and training, and help find solutions that will benefit learners, workers and employers in the region.

Methodology

A community needs assessment survey regarding adult education and training was developed. It required online submission. There were 173 surveys submitted from respondents in the East Central Alberta region.

Partners

Alberta Rural Development Network and Battle River Training Foundation.

Demographic summary

The majority of respondents (81%) were women. Most respondents (85%) were ages 25-64, i.e. working age, with the largest number (38%) ages 35-50. There was no appreciable difference between those who had children under 25 and those who didn't. Seventy-four percent lived in Flagstaff County with the greatest number residing in Killam (42%).

Respondents were more highly educated than average with nearly 82% indicating they had taken post-secondary courses or completed a diploma or degree program (54% had completed their program). Of the remainder, 41.5% had a Grade 12 diploma and 13% a trades certificate. The majority (51.2%) were employed full time and another 19% were self-employed. Only 3.5% were unemployed.

Observation: It is likely that the people who responded to this survey are not typical of the overall population in East Central Alberta; e.g. a 1998 survey showed 14.4% of population was over 65 while only 4% of survey respondents were in that age bracket. However, it is more likely that those of working age would be most interested in this survey. The higher percentage of female respondents likely reflects their interest in education for their children as well as themselves. Similarly, those with a higher level of education may also be more interested in a survey about education than others in the overall population.

Recommendations:

1. Get more feedback from men and from people with less education.
2. Use a wider variety of methods to collect data, e.g. print surveys available in community offices and at community events, focus groups.
3. Create more awareness of the survey across demographic groups through an email fan out and/or promotional campaign.

Awareness of Battle River Training Foundation

Only 53% of respondents were aware of BRTF and the main avenue for this awareness was word of mouth (62.5%). Other sources listed were about equal in importance, but it is interesting to

see alternative sources listed, such as Facebook (5 people), work (5 people) and a survey brought home by a child from school (1).

Recommendation:

4. BRTF needs to create more awareness in the region. Though mass media resources have had some success, there should be more exploration of alternative ways of getting the word out; e.g. an email fan out, sending information home with school children or having information available in the workplace.

Access to Education

In response to a question about whether there were enough credit courses available to people who have completed Grade 12, there was not much difference between the “no” answers (48%) and the “don’t know” (45%). Most respondents or their children (76%) had not accessed locally available courses. Of the 24% who had, the most common courses were computer training (6 people) and Simply Accounting (5). Where a training institute was mentioned, five indicated the source as the Flagstaff Community Adult Learning Centre and five indicated the University of Alberta’s Augustana Campus. One written comment was telling:

“There is no formal post-secondary education facility. Online courses are available but without support, students often are not successful.”

The majority of respondents (89%) said there was a distinct advantage to having courses offered in the home or community. The top four reasons were:

1. Maintain current job/work (79%)
2. Save time by not commuting (75%)
3. Maintain family life (74%)
4. Save money (74%)

In the written comments, three people indicated that keeping youth in the community was another important benefit (the survey did not list this option). One person offered a longer explanation why community-based courses are preferred:

“By offering courses in the community, students would be less anxious about the other related stresses such as mileage expense, the commute, unfamiliar surroundings, and being away from family and community supports. Being less anxious about the logistics and atmosphere would improve the success rate in completing the courses, which in turn increases the success rate in achieving better employment.”

However, the majority prefer community-based courses to be delivered in-person, either in a classroom with an instructor (64%) or in a workshop with a facilitator (67%). Online courses that could be completed at home at the individual’s choice of time also seemed to be acceptable (60.5%). In general, any type of scheduled online course including videoconferencing was not a preferred option. Just over half of respondents (53.5%) said if courses were more accessible, they would take them; another 40% were unsure. The courses most wanted were:

1. Business, including management and leadership (9)
2. Computer (9)
3. Psychology (7)

4. Healthcare/human services (6) (Note: wide variable here – no two people wanted the same type of course/program; e.g. LPN, holistic medicine, physical therapy)
5. Accounting/bookkeeping (5)

The survey did not inquire about preferred times to take courses (include in future) but one person commented on this:

“Some courses must be offered in the evenings/weekends. Many are offered in the day for agricultural, but many farmers work at off-farm jobs.”

One remark underscores the potential lack of understanding of BRTF’s role, which is not to offer courses, but rather, to assist residents in accessing available courses:

“There are more courses offered by adult ed than Battle River. You need to get more of them at home and extra ed courses such as safety, food courses, bookkeeping, etc.”

The majority of respondents (64%) were willing to take courses online, but 29% of respondents said they don’t know whether they would. Once again, the majority (60.5%) favoured in-person courses over online and 23% said they don’t have high speed internet to make online learning possible. Some comments:

“Learning requires peer support as well as instructor support; a cohort is best.”

“I’ve done online stuff in the past and it generally doesn’t work well for me.”

However, there were others who would find online courses well-suited to their lifestyle:

“It is not always possible for people to go to an urban centre for further education and the timing may not be right for the student. I did high school upgrading many years ago by correspondence and I lived in the city. The main reason for this choice was that I had a full time job and two babies, so the only time I had to work on this was while they slept in the evening. If there are others out there who find themselves in this situation where they cannot afford to be away from home, this is an awesome way to go.”

Recommendations:

5. Most respondents prefer in-person instruction, so attempts should be made to bring workshops and classroom style teaching into the region.
6. Where online learning is offered, courses should be delivered at unscheduled times, i.e. individuals choosing their own time to work; videoconferencing and other scheduled online courses were the least liked of all delivery methods.
7. Compile and promote courses and classes offered locally. Partner with other organizations offering courses.
8. Promote popular courses through local media, municipal and partner websites, and other places. Though the majority want courses in their community, nearly half of respondents were unaware of what is currently available.

Preferred Courses

The number one type of course wanted is business (71%), followed by trades (59.5%) and health (49%).

In a question specific to business education courses, the greatest interest is in management (32% very interested, 41% somewhat interested for a total of 73%), followed by accounting (27% and 41.5% for a total of 68.5%) and financial services (24% and 50%). Interest in marketing courses was also high.

Employers' Response

Seventy percent of employers would be more willing to send staff for training if it were offered locally. Courses employers most want their staff to take are: office/business administration (15 of 47), customer service (8 of 47) and Class 1 driving and airbrakes (6 of 47). As one employer commented:

"Of course this would benefit both parties: the employer still having the worker and the worker still able to work and make money while being educated."

Courses employers would like to take themselves include time management (57%), supervisory skills (52%) with accounting (50.5%) and marketing (49.5%) nearly tied for third place. As one person commented:

"Learning only increases one's ability to gain better employment in a broader range of options."

Recommendations:

9. Offer some courses such as Customer Service or Time Management as in person workshops delivered by a post-secondary, the Chamber of Commerce or through the Alberta Best program.
10. Explore offering an Office Admin program in the community.
11. Improve access to Management and Supervisory courses that could be offered as a combination of in person workshops and online courses.

Conclusions

People in East Central Alberta are interested in education and want more education and training courses in their community.

Since only 53% of respondents were aware of BRFT, more effort must be made to market the organization and its services. Marketing other than mass media should be tried.

Survey respondents prefer in-person training over online, but are willing to go online if they have sufficient computer training and the technical capacity for high speed internet. However, they want online training to be flexible to their needs, i.e. unscheduled. For the same reason, they prefer courses to be offered outside work hours, i.e. evenings and weekends.

Employers favour having more courses brought to the region and say it would be of benefit to both the employee and themselves. The top three courses they want for their staff are office/business administration, customer service and Class 1/airbrakes.

For future surveys, there should be a more concerted attempt to get better representation from the broader community, in particular men and people with less education. Some ways to do this might be asking employers to have their staff fill out the questionnaire, or having the survey available at displays or community events such as rodeos or fairs.