

IMPLEMENTING AND EVALUATING THE LEARNING AND EMPLOYMENT ASSESSMENT PROFILE (LEAP)

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The Learning and Employment Assessment Profile was developed to assist persons with learning disabilities and other cognitively based difficulties, who are employment disadvantaged, to understand better their strengths, difficulties and develop a set of skills focussed on overcoming the education and employment related barriers that they face.

This document, a series of self-help workbooks, was originally developed in response to a report that identified that this population faced (and continues to face) significant systemic discrimination, in spite of the presence of strong anti-discrimination legislation in Canada. To quote the report, it stated that: *“inequality is the current reality for persons with learning disabilities.”* Many people questioned this comment and the report’s findings, especially when it also identified that people with learning disabilities are in many ways at a greater disadvantage than persons with other more obvious and visible disabilities.

What are the reasons for this situation?

Specific learning disabilities effect the lives of approximately 10% of the general population. This statistic cuts across national, ethnic and racial boundaries as well as socio-economic conditions. In spite of this significant incidence figure, there is limited understanding and acceptance of learning disabilities as a disabling condition. In fact, the scepticism of society as a whole and the lack of acceptance that learning disabilities are a real disability are among the key factors that make the lives of people with learning disabilities so difficult.

The reasons for this include a number of factors, such as:

- X learning disabilities are still not fully understood or accepted as the neurological condition that they are, manifesting itself in a series of psychological processing deficits;
- X learning disabilities are invisible and therefore many people deny their existence;
- X there is no single, universally accepted definition of learning disabilities and the definitions that are widely used, such as the ones included in DSM iv or the World Health Organization’s listing of disabling conditions, are primarily based on the exclusion model, i.e. what it is not;
- X learning disabilities are diverse in their severity and complexity, which makes it easier to deny that it is a condition that is intrinsic to the individual and not the result of lack of motivation, laziness, poor education or parenting or other extrinsic factors;
- X since one of the requirements for diagnosing learning disabilities is average intelligence, it is easy to accuse those who have them and their advocates of

- elitism;
- X since there is a complex diagnostic requirement for both average intelligence and at the same time unexpected academic underachievement, it becomes easier to blame the person who has learning disabilities for the difficulties (you are lazy, unmotivated or stupid) than to accept that we have an obligation to teach them the way they learn and to accommodate their needs, in the same way that we do willingly for people with other disabilities.

Many people with learning disabilities are quite successful and require little or no outside assistance. They have figured out a way for themselves where they can utilize their strengths and use coping strategies to meet those requirements which fall into the area of their learning disabilities. Such people can and usually do well in school and go on to becoming productively employed. Frequently, they are the only ones who are aware of the learning disabilities that they have.

This is not the case for the majority of people with learning disabilities. The majority, even with the learning disabilities having been identified, struggle with schooling and are significantly disadvantaged when it comes to the world of employment. Many are on a merry-go-round of under- and unemployment. They often feel victimized by society. For those whose difficulties have never formally been ascribed to a learning disability, the situation is even more complex. They are likely to blame themselves and turn their anger and disappointment inward.

Numerous studies have shown that people with learning disabilities face significant discrimination, even in places and settings where there is legislation against such discrimination against those who have disabilities. Often such legislation is applied to helping those who have visible and/or clearly understood disabilities. The legislation is frequently silent on the subject of learning disabilities or even actually excludes them.

It is important to proceed with the requisite systemic advocacy in dealing with this situation. But in the meantime it is important to recognize that people who have learning disabilities and who are employment disadvantaged today do not have the time to await such future changes as such advocacy might produce at some future date.

The **Learning and Employment Assessment Profile** is one of many projects, undertaken by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, geared to assisting people to become more successful in their education, vocational training and employment prospects. While adults out of the educational system were the primary target for **LEAP**, it became clear, once **LEAP** was available and utilized by many people, that its components would also be helpful to adolescents approaching their transition years within secondary schools, young adults engaged in post-secondary education and a variety of vocational and employment related training programs. As a result, today **LEAP** is used in a number of different formats in a number of quite diverse settings.

The original underlying principle for the **LEAP** process was that people with learning disabilities are almost always employable, i.e. with the requisite self-awareness,

training, support and accommodation they can work and support themselves. Other significant relevant principles guiding the **LEAP** process relate to the importance of persons with learning disabilities learning the skills of:

- X **empowerment**, which is defined here as learning to make conscious and informed choices and decisions throughout life, based on one's individual strengths and competencies;
- X **reframing**, which calls for eliminating learned helplessness and seeing oneself as a victim by learning to look at learning disabilities in a more positive context;
- X **resilience**, which enables people who are fundamentally disadvantaged to learn to overcome the negative impact of the innate disadvantage, through focussing on strengths and competencies.

If we start from the premise that people with learning disabilities are essentially employable, then why are so many of them unemployed? This is often due to the fact that they may not be job ready, when they seek employment. In spite of the fact that they have average abilities and many have a reasonable level of education, they are often unsuccessful at getting and even more frequently at keeping a job.

Being job ready calls for the following:

- X having a viable occupational or career goal;
- X having the education, training, skills and experience needed to achieve that goal;
- X acquiring necessary job application and job search skills;
- X the ability to demonstrate that he or she can meet the requirements of the job;
- X the ability to keep the job, by working hard and satisfying the ongoing requirements.

Because so many people with learning disabilities have a limited understanding of their own learning disabilities and their impact on employment, they frequently cannot and do not present themselves as competent individuals who can meet the demands of the job under discussion. They focus on the things that they have difficulties with or that they cannot do at all, instead of demonstrating that with coping and compensatory strategies and accommodation, if needed, they can be successful in carrying out the essential duties of the job.

Research indicates that employers are interested in hiring people who view themselves as competent, who can do the job well and as the employer wants. They want employees who are productive, committed to meeting the requirements of the job, flexible and fit in well. They may feel very sorry for the person who stresses their difficulties and problems, but they are unlikely to hire such a person in preference to the potential employee who focuses on his or her competencies.

Similarly, in an educational setting, even if accommodating disabilities is the explicit policy of the school, college or university, it is the persons who can proactively disclose their disability effectively, explain and clarify their needs and advocate for the right kind

of appropriate accommodations, who are going to be really successful. Others, who wait and then fail are much less likely to receive institutional and faculty support to meet their needs.

The **LEAP** process enables people with learning disabilities to make a switch from focussing on their problems and difficulties to viewing themselves in terms of their strengths and competencies.

The **LEAP** binder consists of ten separate units. These are as follows:

- X **Introduction to LEAP and learning disabilities**, which includes some general information on the process, on how to use the materials contained within the binder and some general information about learning disabilities;
- X **Understanding Your Assessments**, which enables the consumer to review any formal assessments that they have on hand, determine whether an assessment or re-assessment is required before they can fully understand their learning disabilities, and develop an assessment review form
- X **Focussing on Your Strengths**, which enables consumers to review and understand their cognitive or academic skills, identify areas which create a barrier for them, focus on coping strategies and accommodations that they use already and/or would benefit from and learn to write competency statements;
- X **Learning Styles and Strategies** is a section that enhances further the understanding that in order to be successful, people need to know at least as much if not more about their strengths and competencies than about their problems and difficulties;
- X **Assessment Summary**, which enables the consumer to take stock of his or her strengths, competencies, learning style preferences, used and needed coping strategies and accommodations;
- X **Introduction to Finding Employment:** which helps the consumer to focus on his or her employability, interests, goals, finding a job to match those interests and goals and trying to determine what might be a suitable job for him or her;
- X **Presenting Yourself to Employers:** which provides a brief overview of resume writing, job search skills and job interviews.
- X **Disclosure and Workplace Strategies:** which reviews the advantages and disadvantages of disclosing the disability in the workplace, provides guidance in how to explain one's learning disability and offers a list of useful workplace strategies to compensate for and accommodate learning disabilities;
- X **LEAP to Success:** is a summary section, in which the consumer is helped to review what he or she has learned about him/herself, confirm one or more employment goals and the steps needed at this stage to achieve this goal;
- X **Useful Information:** which contains just that, a series of definitions, a reading list and some pages that may be photocopied and shared.

In addition to the written manual in English , **LEAP** is available in French and on audiotape in English.

The original version of **LEAP** was piloted with individuals who were looking to change their potential employment status and groups of adults with learning disabilities who participated in the Learning Disabilities Association's adult support groups. We also had some people who do not have learning disabilities work their way through the process, in order to provide feed back on the ease of use. Through this piloting, it became clear that such a lengthy and complex process of self-discovery and planning is very hard for anyone to handle individually, without guidance and regular help. Obviously, this is even harder for adults with learning disabilities, many of whom have become entrenched in seeing themselves as incapable, incompetent and as victims of their own and society's lack of understanding and support.

Therefore, it became necessary to develop a Facilitator's Manual and to train individuals in how to assist others through the **LEAP** process. This made the use of the manual and the journey that it requires of consumers much easier to undertake.

The first major application has been through a Canada wide project, where, under the leadership of the Learning Disabilities Association and funded by Human Resources Development Canada, individuals whose unemployment benefits have expired were able to participate in a training and employment preparation program. These individuals were selected through a preliminary screening program and were expected to have an identified or suspected learning disability. The project components were a psycho-educational assessment, training in the **LEAP** process, including a careful and thorough explanation of the results of the assessment findings and their implications for employment and a four month subsidized job placement.

Although this project has not been fully completed, in most cases those individuals who completed all components over the six month period were able then to obtain a job, commensurate with their education, skills and interests. Many others identified through the **LEAP** process that they needed to return to school to acquire further education or training, so that they could in fact obtain and maintain a job that matches their strengths and interests.

As this pilot project unfolded, many of the community colleges and universities in Ontario expressed an interest to learn more about the **LEAP** process and its applicability to their activities.

This interest was heightened when the Ontario Government established the Learning Opportunities Task Force to develop a series of pilot projects to serve students with specific learning disabilities within the post-secondary educational sector. These pilots were based on the following underlying principle:

Students with specific learning disabilities are able to succeed in the post-secondary educational sector, provided that they have access to the key components which will allow them to reach their potential and achieve their goal. Based on some in-depth research, indicators of success for students with learning disabilities in the post-

secondary educational sector were determined to include:

- X entry into an academic programme of the student's choice, provided that the student meets standard entrance requirements;
- X successfully meeting the essential requirements of the programme, although the manner in which the student demonstrates mastery may be altered by academic accommodations, programme modifications or the use of coping and compensatory strategies, but with no changes to standards or outcomes;
- X graduation;
- X possessing the requisite skills to pass any licensing requirements, with appropriate accommodations, if needed, relating to the field of study or career that he or she has chosen;
- X being employment ready;
- X being sufficiently job ready that he or she can advocate for any job accommodations that may be required in order to obtain and maintain employment.

Each of these pilot institutions, four universities and nine community colleges, were expected to develop their programs in line with these success indicators. As a result, every one of them has been involved in evaluating existing assessments or reassessing students to determine the eligibility of the students to participate in these pilot projects and at the same time to offer in depth help to the students to understand their learning disabilities. Many of the pilots have found the assessment related sections of the **LEAP** manual a helpful process for this.

Others have developed credit courses on student success issues in which such self-awareness and understanding are key components. In such courses, students are provided with information about and a chance to practise disclosure within their institution and to enhance their self-advocacy skills for needed accommodations.

To assist with this process, a disclosure chart was developed for post-secondary educational purposes, to match the employment disclosure chart, included in the **LEAP** manual. This will be available as a handout at the session offered at the Pathways 5 conference related to the **LEAP** process.

Every one of the pilot projects offers a career education component in some form. These may take the form of a career success credit course, workshops, individual counselling, etc. Again, many of these components utilize the **LEAP** process in assisting their students to become job ready.

In evaluating the results of utilizing **LEAP**, one institution reported the following:

When students began **LEAP**, virtually all were unable to explain their learning disability. They were often quite negative about their future success and were reluctant to advocate on their own behalf. After working through **LEAP**'s assessment components, students reported that they gained:

- X the ability to explain their learning disability;
- X an improved understanding of learning disabilities in general;
- X a recognition that they are not stupid, lazy or slow;
- X a knowledge of the differences between accommodations and strategies;
- X a better understanding of the ways that they learn best.

Of those who completed **LEAP**,

- X 83% found it helped them understand their assessment results at least somewhat (giving 3, 4 or 5 on a five point rating scale);
- X 83% found that it helped them understand their strengths and needs at least somewhat;
- X 78% found it helped them understand their learning styles at least somewhat;
- X 78% found it helped them identify strategies to be a more successful learner at least somewhat;
- X 60% found it helped them become more comfortable/ confident in asking for accommodations.

After participating in the pilot project and completing **LEAP**:

- X 76% of the students feel that their hopefulness about completing their post-secondary program, finding and keeping a job has improved at least somewhat.

In many respects, this last statistic indicates more than any other that these students have gained in empowerment, have improved in reframing their learning disability and have enhanced their resilience. In other words, **LEAP** appears to have worked for them.

Following the success of **LEAP** in the post-secondary setting, a secondary school version in two sections, **Self-awareness: the journey inward** and **Step by Step: planning for life after high school** has been developed. It is currently being piloted in ten secondary schools throughout Ontario. We have high hopes that this will be successful for many students with learning disabilities and may eventually become part of the regular curriculum for these students.

In conclusion, the **LEAP** process appears to be fulfilling its promise in helping people with learning disabilities change how they see themselves, learn to focus on their strengths and achieve their goals.