

Remote Delivery: The Impact of Covid-19 on Serving Newcomer Clients

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Remote work will be a legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic. This legacy undoubtedly affects all job seekers, but it has had a particularly unique impact on newcomers.

The truth is, Covid-19 did not affect all population groups in the same way. Although we hear much on the news about the economic difficulties the pandemic poses to women, or job prospects and their impact on youth and students, there are less stories about how newcomers are disproportionately affected. Yet, across our beautiful country, there are vast numbers of newcomers deeply affected by job losses ([StatCan, 2020](#)), and many don't have established connections to fall back on for support. This is where we come in.

As a non-profit organization, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) has been supporting newcomers to navigate this 'new normal' and its impacts. Since the onset of Covid-19, we have adapted to deliver our programs primarily online. As staff members have quickly modified, trained, and redesigned for online service delivery, each of us has encountered various challenges and opportunities based on myriad factors (such as the type of service we're delivering, or the challenges of adapting homes to offices). One theme has been consistent, however: our commitment to helping our clients in the delivery of high-quality service has never wavered. Alongside our commitment, the theme of consistent innovation re-emerged, and along with it, new strategies.

Please note: In preparation for this article, I reached out to two principle groups of ISANS' Employment & Bridging team: employment specialists and pre-employment program coordinators or facilitators.

Employment specialists (ES) help newcomers create a plan of action for their goals, needs, and situation. This could include creating a return-to-work action plan, working on a Canadian-style resume and cover letter, exploring pathways to licensure and applying for financial support through the Atlantic Immigrant Career Loan Fund (AICLF), learning job search techniques, practicing interview skills, and understanding Canadian workplace culture, just to name a few.

The program coordinators and facilitators deliver pre-employment workshops on specific topics to assist newcomer clients to enhance their ability to integrate into the labour market in Nova Scotia.

Generally, clients meet with their ES, who will in turn refer them to specific workshops based on goals, needs, and situation.

On the following pages are some of the most recurring challenges and opportunities of remote delivery of services to newcomers, as well as tips and strategies for adapting to remote delivery. The challenges, opportunities, tips, and strategies in this article are the result of conversations with the ISANS Employment & Bridging team and are not definitive. Instead, they form a snapshot from a dedicated and passionate team sharing some struggles, strategies for mitigating them, as well as opportunities.

By sharing our team's collective wisdom, it is my hope that one tip or strategy might help one or more of our equally committed colleagues across Canada. And, who knows? Perhaps this article can begin a dialogue or spark another strategy to further support our mutual desire to help newcomers build a future in Canada, and to create communities where all can belong and grow.

Challenges and Opportunities of Remote Delivery

1) **Challenge: Stress, and the mental and emotional health of clients, their families—and everyone!**

Let us acknowledge the elephant in the room: Covid-19 has been stressful for everyone. Public health actions, such as social distancing, can make us feel isolated and lonely, and can increase stress and anxiety. However, stress, fear, and anxiety can be even more overwhelming and cause stronger emotions if you are new to a country. Searching for a job and possibly a home can exacerbate these feelings. There are clearly many compounding and significant stressors.

A few dos and don'ts for supporting newcomers during the pandemic:

- ✓ Do validate client emotions and acknowledge how challenging times are right now
- ✓ Do offer any resources that might help them
- ✓ Do listen and acknowledge that new ways of doing things can feel uncomfortable, strange, or awkward

- ✗ Don't suppress negativity if it shows up; acknowledge it, and do your best to try to re-orient toward the positive
- ✗ Don't take it personally
- ✗ Don't be too hard on yourself or your clients: we're all learners in this together

"Since COVID caused limited access to all kind services for our clients, some of them need to talk, they need somebody just to listen to them, so I do allow more time during our meetings for them to talk when I recognize the need." – Ewa Olczuk, Employment Specialist

"What I have been doing for clients is to talk to them and assure them they are not alone . . . in general I've tried to be a good listener and a hope giver." – Astareh Kiani, Coordinator, Financial Services Bridging Program

2) Opportunity: Employment specialists, as well as many program coordinators and facilitators, are reporting higher numbers and higher attendance

“Client attendance is much higher when I telephone or Skype them (if they need to come to the office – many more ‘no shows’).” – Magda Lynch, Employment Specialist

“I noticed not only higher numbers but also more consistent attendance – the biggest difference for my clients (women) was not having to worry about childcare arrangements; they can attend the class while their children are next to them at home.” – Nadira Al-Nasleh, Facilitator, Visible Minority Newcomer Women at Work

“Regarding computer courses . . . we have had an increase in registration and attendance of between 40-50%.” – Anne McKenna, Instructor, Computer Skills Training

3) Challenge: Adapting on-site programs that were highly participatory with lots of relationship-building into effective, virtual employment and training programs

By no means should we attempt to undervalue the sheer amount of work involved in adapting programs to remote delivery. It takes work to properly adapt to online delivery. Facilitators need to learn technologies and tools quickly that are more or less familiar to them. They need to adapt or redesign experiential exercises for virtual facilitation. At the same time, facilitators need to help their clients learn the same technologies and tools, and inspire them with the belief that these adapted practices will support their goals and help them build job-search strategies and resilience.

“Since I always try to create a very interactive classroom where clients feel comfortable sharing ideas and building relationships, this is much harder to do without the face-to-face interaction— but it’s not impossible.” – Cassidy Sholl, Coordinator, Pre-Employment Workshops

4) Opportunity: Platforms like Zoom include features such as breakout rooms, which can make relationship building seem less intimidating for more introverted individuals

In some instances, facilitators are reporting that clients are gaining more agency and developing leadership skills inside the breakout rooms. Because of the perceived absence of a facilitator, some individual learners begin to step up. Letting them prepare topics in advance to discuss with their peers can further decrease anxiety or feeling put on the spot. For this reason, we recommend providing attendees with a heads-up about breakout rooms.

5) Challenge: Adapting and making sacrifices to work from home

This topic could be an entire article by itself, because the diversity of situations cannot possibly be summarized in a single point. From eldercare, to the financial pressures of trying to equip an office space (e.g. chairs or printers), or emotional factors for those trying to work in a space with children—these are just a few of the challenges. And, let’s not forget: barking dogs!

In some parts of Canada, service providers are facing a season where they will have to heat their homes all day when they once could save money by turning the heat down during the day. Most of us don’t have the means to heat *just* our office; we have to heat the whole house or apartment. For others, they miss the consistent motivation they get by working alongside their beloved peers. Yes, it’s been a challenge.

6) Opportunity: At the same time, there is increased convenience and opportunities to save resources

“Firstly, my favourite aspect about working remotely with clients is the convenience. Many clients are grateful for the ability to have phone call appointments, as they can take a break or step out of work, have their appointment, and go back to work, instead of having to go to ISANS offices and wait, etc. This has made the services much more accessible for many clients.” – Haley Glenen, Employment Specialist

7) Opportunity: Encouraging a more targeted approach for certain interventions, such as interview preparation

“One of the things I’ve changed since Covid, which is working very well, is matching the format of the real interview to the practice interview appointment. If a client is having a phone interview, our appointment is over the phone, a Team’s interview is practiced over Teams. This allows me to give practical feedback not just about the content of the interview, but also the medium (phone/video/in-person). They can also practice setting up possible new technology before the actual interview. I often coach clients on how to present themselves professionally on a video interview (lighting/background/camera angle). I think this added benefit to the client demonstrates our ability to be flexible.” – Brenda Maclsaac, Coordinator Practice Interview

8) Opportunity: New training, e-learning, and professional development

With the shift to working from home, social distancing and gathering limits in effect, it’s no surprise that many employees have been learning all about virtual webinars and eLearning. Where once the levels of comfort and proficiency with online technologies and platforms was a wide spectrum, today, that playing field has leveled. Staff have been scrambling to train in new technologies and improve their skills.

Many online professional development opportunities have flourished—many of them free!

However, this plethora of opportunities has also brought about a curating challenge. After all, with so much out there, we must also prioritize. Would we rather take an 8-hour course doing a deep dive into a topic, or would we manage time more effectively by obtaining a 2-4 page checklist to follow? Covid-19 has urged us to ask ourselves many questions.

This brings us to our final challenge, which is also a question.

9) Challenge: How do we support one another?

One key aspect colleagues mention over and over relates to our respective struggle with how to support one another through this challenge. We want to connect with our colleagues and our clients while also maintaining work-life balance. Some are better at balancing than others. How can we support those who find it hard? Or, for those struggling with anxiety, how can we lift their spirits without sounding glib? For some, we strive to maintain rigour to ensure our clients learn the tools and resources as well or better than before given the new challenges they face. For others, priorities may be shifting. Many of us are asking ourselves how to adapt our teaching styles so that we provide what our clients need most in this moment in history.

We are all works in progress in the face of the pandemic. A kind word, patience, compassion, and an attentive ear will always be appropriate no matter where we are in our progression.

Tips and Strategies for Remote Delivery

1) Collaborate (with necessity being the “mother of innovation”)!

When traditional ways of doing things have no longer been working as effectively as they once had, ISANS’ employment specialists have consistently innovated through their spirit of openness, commitment to excellence, reflection, dialogue, and collaboration.

“[My colleague] Ann Botross and I proposed an initiative to provide peer-support, job-readiness circles with clients. The main purpose of the circle is to explore job-search topics as a group in a casual, relaxed atmosphere over Zoom. Another reason for the circle was to support clients’ mental health and well-being during the stressful time of Covid-19. The circle provides information PowerPoint slides; however, the discussion in the circle is driven by clients and their experiences. A working group of employment specialists are currently facilitating the circles, and so far 12 have been held. Some of the topics included “Motivation,” “The Mindset of Networking,” and “Wellness in the Workplace.” At the end of the circle, the facilitators send out surveys to gather feedback and comments. The feedback has been wonderful so far, with many

clients reporting increased feelings of connection, hope, and optimism.” – Kelly Weaver, Employment Specialist

2) Maintain openness to learning new technologies

Since smooth, remote delivery is often dependent on technology working well, it is very important that employment specialists and program facilitators are open to training themselves and carving out the time to do it.

“I would say my #1 strategy that I have been using to adapt to the new facilitation circumstances is to learn/perfect technology that I hadn’t previously been as comfortable with and to make this technology feel accessible to clients.” – Cassidy Sholl, Coordinator, Pre-Employment Workshops

3) Provide clear instructions to attendees prior to workshops or virtual meetings

In supporting clients who are mainly English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, it is extremely important to consider simplicity of language and communication, both verbally and written. In several classrooms, facilitators collaborated to create guides with easy-to-understand steps about technologies or platforms the clients would use during workshops. They also provided the guides for clients to read over before they began a workshop. Facilitators reported that clients were more likely to participate when they felt comfortable and confident when given the opportunity to gain a basic understanding of the platform and its features.

“Overall, these two shifts—being open to using technology in new ways and making this technology feel accessible to clients—has been one of the keys to success for working at home!” –Cassidy Sholl, Coordinator, Pre-Employment Workshops

4) Use screen-sharing features to collaborate on job-search documents, which is both effective and empowering!

“I’ve also found that sharing my [and my] client’s screen while working on resumes and cover letters helps clients understand the documents’ format better. It also empowers them to try and add changes on their own with my encouragement and feel more capable in doing so. Before the pandemic, I used to work on hard copies of client’s resume, add comments, [then] the client would work on the resume at home and send me their updated copy. During the pandemic, the experience became more interactive and I find many clients see it as more effective.” – Natalya Sorokin, Employment Specialist

5) Work with interpreters when supporting clients who are learning to communicate in English

For clients who are learning to communicate in English, and who may struggle during their early stages of learning, several colleagues mentioned that 3-way telephone conferencing with an interpreter is a good strategy. Although it may take some time for clients to get used to this set-up, once the flow is established, it can work quite well. For some, they have discovered that it is best to keep meetings as simple as possible when phone conferencing with a client and interpreter, then to send an email to the client with a summary (sometimes via the interpreter).

6) Have technical support available whenever possible

For remote users, tech support is both highly recommended for smooth operations and security reasons, as well as for lowering user stress, especially if users are quarantining due to health concerns. Remote workers need to have clear protocols for IT support and for crisis management if they encounter issues. Whether at the office or at home, technical issues do arise. The better prepared we are, the more likely we can overcome the challenges.

7) Use Zoom, or another video conferencing service!

This may come as no surprise, but many employment specialists and facilitators have fallen for Zoom.

“My favourite facilitation strategy is using Zoom and the breakout rooms. I find this so useful for clients to make the class more intimate, and allow the clients to connect and support each other.

When counselling one-on-one, I love using Zoom and the screen-sharing ability. This is great to work with clients bit by bit through their resume, go over bullet points, why we include what we do, and to clarify anything that isn't clear. This has been great!” – Haley Glenen, Employment Series Coordinator and Employment Specialist

Conclusion

I would like to return to the most common comment I heard from colleagues when compiling these challenges, opportunities, tips, and strategies: that so many of us are working to find ways to support each another.

This support is yet another legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic, and may this be the legacy our clients remember most: how front-line support workers were there for them in their time of need, how we managed to uplift their spirits in a particularly tough moment, and shine a light where it was dark.

And, may we all—wherever we are across this beautiful and vast landscape we call Canada—take a moment to celebrate our collective compassion, innovation, and most especially, our beautiful hearts. May you, your families, and your clients please stay safe!