

# Alberta Career Development Action Group

## An Historical Overview

*Bryan Hiebert*

(updated 2002-02-23)

### Background

On November 22, 1994, an exploratory meeting was held of people who had been active in developing resources, offering training, or coordinating the practice of career development in Alberta. People also were invited from organizations who were interested in promoting career development or who could potentially benefit from being involved in an initiative to coordinate career development activities. Earlier that year, the *Survey of Career and Employment Counselling in Canada*, conducted for the Canadian Labour Force Development Board by the Canadian Career Development Foundation, then called the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation, identified that there was an abundance of high quality career development resources and training programs for practitioners. However, the survey results also pointed to a strong need for greater coordination of leadership in career development and more coordination of training and professional inservice. Therefore, it seemed timely to explore the development of broad initiatives that might reach a wider range of professionals and a formal structure to coordinate and promote professional development in the province.

The invitation list for the initial meeting included about 30 people from government departments, provincial professional associations, departments in universities and colleges, and service provider groups. The meeting was hosted by Garnet Millar, the Provincial Coordinator of Guidance and Counselling, Alberta Education. Lynne Bezanson, Executive Director of the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation and Bryan Hiebert, President of the CCDF, facilitated the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to provide a forum for people to share what they were doing in career development, identify needs, and explore the potential for collaboration.

About 20 people attended the initial meeting. A process was planned to facilitate people sharing their accomplishments and identifying their needs. After brief introductions, people scripted 3 “want adds,” one outlining things they needed, a second outlining what they had to offer, and a third identifying where they saw potential for collaboration. People posted their “want adds” and were then given an opportunity to browse the adds to what was available and what was needed. Follow-up small group discussions served to highlight the strengths of individuals and organization, as well as elaborate specific areas of needs and places for potential collaboration. This proved to be an interesting and efficient way to help participants get a snap shot of the current state of affairs regarding career development in Alberta.

People participated in the initial meeting for a variety of reasons. For some, the increased emphasis in government on partnerships provided the incentive. For others, the hope for additional resources or a search for like-minded colleagues was a motivating factor. Some participants came with offers to share materials, others were hoping to foster a stronger impact for career development via collective action, while others were just curious. For many, there was a strong self-interest factor. One post-secondary institution had just received a 30% budget reduction, at the same time as a change in mandate was being introduced to emphasize greater collaboration with colleges and other public and private groups. One practitioner group, in partnership with a provincial government department, had been working for 2 years to establish

an informal practitioner network. This network had developed to a point where members were interested in exploring the formation of a more formal professional group. A province-wide survey had been completed in which over 90% of the respondents expressed interest in creating a formal association. The meeting served as a convenient forum for determining how much additional support or assistance might be available. One government department had been involved in developing several projects that they believed would benefit from the support of other departments and involvement with practitioners in the field. At this same time, there were government-wide budget cuts at both provincial and federal levels and a move towards examining partnerships as an effective way to deliver services. This meeting was seen as a natural source for identifying potential partnerships.

At the close of the meeting consensus developed that the day had been very productive, that there was indeed much room for collaboration, and that perhaps by working together on common goals more could be accomplished collectively than any group could accomplish individually. There was agreement that no one needed an extra meeting to go to, but if the focus could be on action that advanced career development in the province, then people would be willing to contribute time and resources. To convey this focus, those present agreed on the name "Alberta Career Development Action Group."

### **Representation**

Initially, the Alberta Career Development Action Group had representation from four sectors involved in career development.

1. Government
  - Alberta Advanced Education & Career Development
  - Alberta Family & Social Services
  - Alberta Education
  - Human Resources Development Canada
2. Post-secondary
  - University of Alberta (Continuing Professional Development)
  - University of Calgary (Faculty of Continuing Education)
  - Athabasca University
  - Grant MacEwan Community College
  - Concordia University College
3. Service providers
  - Canadian Guidance & Counselling Foundation
  - Alberta Association of Community-Based Trainers
  - Life-Role Development Group
4. Practitioners
  - Edmonton Career Practitioners Network
  - Canadian Guidance & Counselling Association
  - Alberta Teachers Association Guidance Council
  - Society for the Promotion and Advancement of Career Education (SPACE)

Recently, the scope of the Action Group has expanded to include the business sector, and representation from a broader cross section of practitioner groups, including the Alberta Metis Nation and groups serving special needs clients.

## **The Early Days**

Early in 1995, members of the Action Group began to identify areas in which they could collaborate and places where collective leadership might be effective. They also began to establish a sense of direction and set priorities. There was general agreement that any Alberta initiatives should be part of, or help to foster, what was happening nationally and in other parts of the world. There was commitment to working on a consensus model and to making sure the group remained inclusive, rather than excluding. This made it possible for all appropriate stakeholders to have input to what was happening. There was a special commitment to serving a wide range of practitioner groups, in order that all people working the field of career development have a voice. As the Action Group became more focused, it became clear that subcommittees would need to be formed to do the background work necessary for informed action. Working groups were established to examine three key areas:

1. alternatives for creating a professional designation for career development practitioners
2. competencies pertaining to career development
3. terms of reference and scope of participation in the Action Group

Three other opportunities for collaborative leadership emerged:

1. The Alberta coordinator for the Canadian Career Information Partnerships invited the Action Group to assume the role of coordinating the career tabloid in Alberta. A successful tabloid, *Career Prospects* was produced in November and through several partners in the Action Group it was widely distributed across the province.
2. Building Tomorrow Today, the First Alberta Regional Consultation for Career Development, was held in May 1995. This training event reached about 400 practitioners across Alberta, bringing them information about state of the art programs and resources. The Consultation was made possible through the collective efforts of the Action Group members, some contributing financial support and other contributing support in kind.
3. The Alberta CanWorkNet Forum was held in October 1995. Through the coordination of partners in the Action Group, over 200 people at 12 sites in 8 different cities or towns in Alberta participated in the Alberta CanWorkNet Forum. CanWorkNet was the forerunner of the Canada WorkInfoNet, or CanWIN. This is a national initiative to coordinate and increase access of career development information on the internet. Alberta has become one of the lead provinces in the CanWIN initiative.

These initiatives helped to raise the profile of career development in the province and introduce practitioners to the impact that the Action Group could make through collaborative effort. They served the multiple purposes of demonstrating leadership, providing important contributions to the field, and creating tangible indicators of success for members of the Action Group.

## **The Current Picture**

Today the Action Group has entered a new era. The chair of the Action Group has changed hands and the scope of involvement has increased. A test of the true worth of an organization occurs when leadership roles are assumed by new people and a transition begins to the next generation. In this case, the purpose of the Action Group remains the same, namely, to implement strategies that improve and support the practice of career development in Alberta. The goals of the Action Group also remain similar, to: share information about resources, increase awareness of and access to training, coordinate training delivery and resource development, and contribute to the development of standards and credentials. The initial list of

Action Group priorities have been met. The second list of priorities, resulting from a visioning exercise in 1998, also have largely been met. A visioning process was conducted in 2001 to achieve clarity on the goals and priorities for the next stage of development in the Action Group. Study groups were established, and work is ongoing, in three areas:

1. ***Rural Career Development.*** The career development needs of people living in rural and remote communities are quite different compared to those living in urban centres. It is important to understand the unique needs and barriers faced by people living in rural and remote communities and to develop interventions that help those people engage in meaningful career/life planning.
2. ***Workplace Wellness and Worker Self-Care.*** Economists agree that health care is becoming a major concern and likely will replace information technology as a major source of employment. With emphasis on increased productivity and the organization bottom line, many workers have lost a sense of balance between their work and home lives. It is important to understand this issue and to help people feel empowered to manage their physical, psychological, social, emotional, and environmental health and well-being.
3. ***Increasing Community Capacity.*** A primary purpose of career development is to help individuals be self-sustaining, access learning and work opportunities, create personally meaningful lives with respect to the work they do, and build healthy families and lifestyles. It is important to help communities create a context that fosters career/life planning for its citizens. To build community capacity requires leadership, time, and effort directed at helping people contribute to their communities in constructive ways.

Work in these three areas is ongoing.

### **Accomplishments**

At Building Tomorrow Today 1998, the Action Group was honored by receiving the Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development Award for Excellence in Career Development. This award was given to recognize the extensive contribution that the Action Group has made to the career development community in Alberta. To date, these accomplishments include:

1. ***Building Tomorrow Today: The Alberta Regional Consultation on Career Development.*** The consultation began in 1995 with 400 people attending. By 1998 it had grown to 650 participants and in 2001 over 800 people attended, making it likely the second largest career development conference in the world. Since 1997, *Building Tomorrow Today* has been co-hosted and co-planned by the Career Development Association of Alberta and the Action Group and the shared roles that now have been created is a testament to the collaborative manner in which the Action Group operates. The idea of provincial action groups and regional consultations on career development has spread to other provinces as well. Today, consultations are held in British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, providing a further increase in the profile of career development in Canada.
2. ***Career Development Competencies.*** A competency document was created and an extensive process was completed to validate the competencies across a wide cross section of career development practitioners. This made a substantial contribution to the Canadian Standards and Guidelines initiative currently in progress. The Action Group coordinated the Alberta consultation process on Canadian Standards. Two members of the National Steering Committee are current or former members of the Action Group, and an additional five

members of the Action Group are active members of the Stakeholder Advisory Council. This gives Alberta a very strong voice in the Canadian Standards initiative.

3. ***Survey of Career Practitioners.*** Prior to the third Building Tomorrow Today, a provincial survey was undertaken to confirm that practitioners wanted to form a professional association for career development in Alberta. This was a joint initiative of the Action Group and the Edmonton Career Practitioners Network. The results indicated overwhelmingly the desire to proceed with the formation of an association and to establish a game plan for increasing professional recognition for those working in the career development field.
4. ***Career Development Association of Alberta.*** Given the overwhelming support from the provincial survey, the Edmonton Career Practitioners Network and the Action Group combined resources to lay the groundwork for the formation of the CDAA. In just 1 year, the CDAA has grown to over 200 members, and is beginning to assume a strong and effective leadership and advocacy role for the professionalization of career development in Alberta.
5. ***Professional Designation.*** Building on the work initially done by the Action Group, the CDAA has embarked on a 3 year plan to create a professional designation in career development. This will interface nicely with the Canadian Standards initiative to provide formal recognition for the competencies of career practitioners.
6. ***Internet Tools and Resources.*** The initial work of the Action Group in promoting the Canada Work Information Network (CanWIN), combined with the continuing effort of the CDAA, resulted in the formation of Alberta WorkInfoNet which later became merged with the Alberta Learning Information System (ALIS) Advisory Group. This provides a vehicle for coordinating internet tools and resources for career development in Alberta.
7. ***Athabasca University Career Development Certificate.*** The Action Group's Training and Professional Development Working Group was instrumental in working with Athabasca University to create the first university credit certificate in career development in Canada. This certificate contains many innovative features such as: prior learning assessment and recognition, formal recognition and accreditation of in-house training done by Action Group partners in initiative, a means for receiving formal university credit for accredited workshop training, and distance delivery of both knowledge and skill components of the program. Since the Athabasca University Certificate was launched, Concordia University College and the University of Calgary have both introduced credit minors in career development in selected undergraduate programs. Thus, the Athabasca University initiative paved the way for creating increased formal recognition of career development as a recognized field of study.
8. ***Career Development Culture.*** Canadians need to have a greater sense of themselves as active agents in their career/life destinies. As active agents, they will be more prepared to market their skills and sell employers on their suitability for a particular job. A greater sense of personal agency will help change the mindset of Canadians from *pursuing* a career path to *creating* a career path. The Action Group developed a major project, in conjunction with the *Edmonton Sun*, aimed at beginning to create a career development culture in the province. This initiative ultimately resulted in the publication of *Career digest: Career development concepts for today*, available from The Career Shop.
9. ***Blueprint for Life/Work Designs.*** The *Blueprint for Life/Work Designs*, being coordinated by the National Life/Work Centre, outlines the client competencies needed for successful career development. The *Blueprint* also can be used by program developers as a basis for

identifying the specific client outcomes associated with tools and resources they are creating. The Action Group coordinated the validation of the Blueprint in Alberta, through field tests in school districts and community agencies and the evaluation of key career development tools and resources.

It is important to understand that all of the above accomplishments were done with no formal funding base for the Action Group. The way of approaching each initiative was to decide together that we wanted to take on a project, then decide what needed to be done to make it happen, decide who could contribute what types of resources (money, time, postage, photocopy, etc.), and then do it. The guiding light in all these endeavours was to build on work that has already been done, maintain an open and inviting process that included the widest possible array of practitioners, and work together in true collaboration where all partners pull together towards common goals. Partners in the Alberta Career Development Action Group sense a window of opportunity for advancing the practice of career development and demonstrate a readiness to move together towards common goals.

### **What We Have Learned**

At a recent meeting of the Action Group, members spent some time examining the various factors that contributed to the success of the Alberta Career Development Action Group and its impact on the career development field. Several factors were identified. Some of them related closely to the people involved in the Action Group and others relating directly to the way in which the group operated. The more important observations are outlined below.

1. ***True Collaboration.*** In the Action Group, the group as a whole decides what it wants to do and how to go about doing it. No one is asked to play someone else's game. The game is created together by all the players. The outcome is open, determined by the group through a consensual decision making process. When people have concerns, or hold dissenting views, they are invited to the table so that their concerns can be dealt with first hand. To facilitate this, we have found it useful to go through each agenda item twice, once for discussion and a second time for action. This helps people to voice their concerns, think carefully about various differing points of view, and then consider action that is in the best interest of the greatest number of players.
2. ***Shared Accolades.*** The Action Group is a collective and takes action as a collective. Thus, the chair needs to be careful to disperse the accolades to everyone who was involved in the process. Like all real partnerships, everyone has a chance to contribute and everyone gets credit for the success. The chair needs to be quite self-sufficient (self-motivated, self-directed) and not overly dependent on support from others. One of the jobs of the chair is to make sure everyone else is feeling validated. Usually, other group members respond by supporting the chair, which in turn helps to continue in the process. The example set by the chair helps all participants recognize each others needs and wants, and work to satisfy them.
3. ***Action Is Happening.*** It is important to have tangible indicators of success early in the process of working together. Group members need to have evidence that concrete outcomes are being achieved. This helps to sustain motivation as well as identify potential areas for further action.
4. ***Mutual Trust Is The Norm.*** As with most partnerships, it is important that everyone has a chance to contribute and that things are structured to help make sure that everyone delivers on their promises. This helps to establish a sense that group members can count on each other to be realistic with their commitments and do what they say they are going to do.

5. ***Membership Is Inclusive (not excluding)***. Our rule of thumb is that that everyone is welcome to participate, but there are no onlookers. This creates a situation where all members a contributing to the goals of the group and feel justified in sharing in the accolades as well.

In many respects, the operation of the Action Group provides a good example of a true collaboration. No one group could have achieved the accomplishments by themselves and the end products have been richer than any of us could have imagined. Group members have learned to recognise each other's strengths and learn that our idiosyncrasies and foibles are part of that strength. A very high level of trust and respect has been established among all group members. All-in-all, the Action Group represents a good example of the adage: "All of us is stronger than each of us!"

### **Acknowledgements**

The success of the Alberta Career Development Action Group is the result of major effort by a great number of people. In acknowledgement of the contribution that many people have had to the success of the initiatives undertaken by the Alberta Career Development Action Group, it is appropriate to recognize the many people who have had a role to play in its success. This list of people includes the following:

#### **Founding Members**

Bryan Hiebert (Chair), Michael Alpern, Jeanna Baty, Elvin Collins, Bart Eisen, Wendy Fox, Sharon Jamieson, Kathy Johnston, Judy Kotylak, Melodye Kunnas, Louise Lockhart, Kathy Malkin, Garnet Millar, Laurie Patterson, Geoff Peruniak, Dave Redekopp, Nell Smith, Deborah Welch, Faye Wiesenberg, Linda Willis

#### **Current Members (May 1998)**

Colleen Crickmore (Chair), Bryan Hiebert, Judy Kotylak, Louise Lockhart, Geoff Peruniak, Dave Redekopp, Iris Saunders, Audrey Stechynsky, Dorothy Humphrey, Deborah Welch, Susan Roper, Linda Willis, Jay Hetherington, Sandra Collins.

#### **Former Active Members**

Sharon Crozier, Wendy Fox, Patricia Lynch-Ordynac, Sharon Jamieson, Kathy Johnston, Richard Krenz, Elsie Lockert, Hazel Love-McLaughlin, Kathy Malkin, John Newark, Permelia Parham, Laurie Patterson, Marnie Robb, Arlene Young, Mike Alpern, Michele Budzak, Sharon Cameron, Elvin Collins, Bart Eisen, Faye Haney, Susan May, Garnet Millar, Bev Sheckter, Lorraine Steele, Eileen Passmore, Anne Westervelt, Faye Wiesenberg, Nell Smith.