Ontario's Developmental Services Human Resource Networks: A promising Practice in the Nonprofit Labour Force

August 2015

List of Contributors:
Sandra O'Neil
Nancy Andrews
Steven Plaum
Roxanne Bird
Michelle Collier
Debbie Bray
Ann Bilodeau
Jim Turner

Contents:

Introduction

Context for the Report:

The Ontario Nonprofit Network is developing a Human Capital Renewal Strategy for the nonprofit sector in the province. In the first phase of that work, research was conducted to identify common labour force challenges that applied across the sector. As part of that process over 800 leaders in the sector were survey, which resulted in the identification of five priorities for Ontario's nonprofit labour force planning and development. {link to Shaping the Future}

This second phase of the work has been focused on identifying and exploring existing initiatives that would support the development of the sector's labour force. Ontario's nonprofit Human Resource (HR) networks, which originated and remain anchored in the Developmental Services (DS) Sector, have been identified as a model that strengthens the nonprofit labour force.

This report identifies the importance of these networks and shares their evolving story. What began in the early 1990s in South Central Ontario as an exploratory meeting between HR professionals has extended into a province-wide model for regional networks. The networks are an important resource for DS organizations, HR professionals and their associated organizations in the nonprofit sector at large.

Report Methodology:

To gather the data for this report, we worked with leads of Ontario's [DS HR Strategy](#) to source email contacts of regional network coordinators. Participating network coordinators filled out an online survey, followed up by an in depth phone conversation. The survey and phone conversations uncovered information about network origins, how the networks currently function, as well as key successes and challenges they face. In total, 8 people, representing a range of network sizes and geography, were consulted in the development of this report.

This report shares the basic network model, main patterns and themes that came up across regions, key success factors, as well as strategies and best practices for network organizing for the support of Ontario's nonprofit labour force.

Network Description:

HR Regional Networks are informal peer groups of HR Professionals and leaders from nonprofit organizations. The networks meet in-person and communicate online primarily to a) share organizational updates, resources, upcoming opportunities and HR challenges and b) host speakers on specialized HR topics to support professional development and increase organizational resiliency.

As described in further detail below, regional networks vary in constitution – some networks have restricted membership to DS HR professionals; others are open to all nonprofit organizations in the region. DS HR professionals and organizations, however, are most strongly connected to the origins and continuity of these networks, and remain anchors within regional networks.

Network Value and Impact:

Some common examples of the value that regional networks provide to HR professionals, or in some cases staff whose responsibilities include HR, and their associated organizations include:

- *Professional development* – most networks attract speakers like lawyers, consultants, or staff from the Ministry of Labour to give presentations and keep HR professionals up to date on current legislation and provincial policy issues that affect HR.

- *Troubleshooting and peer support* – networks are confidential circles that invite and offer advice to HR professionals faced with difficult situations in their respective workplaces.

- *Information sharing* – networks conduct surveys to pool data on shared topics, such as wages or benefits packages. Members also seek out and share effective programming and related materials – such as how to run peer support programs.

- *Organizational policy development* – members often share effective policies and information with one another, and/or work collectively to co-develop policies for HR needs such as hiring.

- *Resource sharing* – members share and invite other organizations' staff to take part in training opportunities for organizations with shared needs.

- *Partnership development* – the general flow of information that the network structure enables has lead to inter-organizational, mutually beneficial partnerships which would have been unlikely to form without the network connections.

- *Training Development* – many regional networks have connected with local college programs to help align curriculum, training and applied learning opportunities for students with the sector's requirements for front line staff.

- *Employment and Retention* – Networks help fill employment gaps and increase retention for part time workers by circulating job postings.

Getting Started – the first HR Network:

Ontario's original nonprofit HR network arose in the early 1990s when HR positions were just beginning to surface in the nonprofit sector. At the time, the HR field was far less resourced than it is today. HR professionals were tasked with navigating through the field and legislation, often creating resources and policies from scratch.
Newly hired as an HR Director for Kitchener-Waterloo Habilitation, Ann Bilodeau immediately sought out other HR professionals in her part of the province. Finding parallel HR positions at Community Living Toronto and Community Living Mississauga, the three HR Directors got together. They quickly discovered that their portfolios were closely aligned and that each would benefit from sharing information. Within a year of gathering as an informal group, many more organizations began designating HR positions in the region.

A basic Terms of Reference (TOR) was developed, specifying the network would include nonprofit organizations only, and that all member agencies would contribute some funds toward a meeting room. The group undertook to phone and send letters to nonprofit organizations in the area to determine whether they had HR positions, and to invite those that did to a network gathering. About 20 organizations came together for the first meeting, each contributing a small amount of money for a shared meeting space at the

Kitchener Holiday Inn. Central to the region, Kitchener's Holiday Inn is the ongoing meeting spot for the South Central group, (25 years later!).

The group was a resource for HR professionals to share current practices from independent organizations, and to put their heads together on developing best practices that each member could take back to their organization and implement as appropriate to their own contexts. They met about four to five times each year, taking a break in the summer.

Mornings were designated for networking, organizational updates, and problem solving with afternoons reserved for a guest speaker on a specialized topic. Early on, the network coordinators recognized the need for meetings to provide clear value to their members' organizations to justify their time away from the office. Bringing in consultants, lawyers, and representatives from the Ministry of Labour helped members get a handle on complex HR issues like pay equity and employment equity. The network's size made its attractive for speakers to come and contribute.

The network clearly demonstrated its value to its members and the sector in 1994 when the Pay Equity Act was rolled out across the province. While the Ministry of Labour had set aside some funds to support those organizations that could demonstrate eligibility, the legislation was difficult to navigate and securing government funding was not guaranteed. So, the network dedicated a meeting to send a clear and unified message to the Ministry. 35 members attended the HR network meeting and completed the survey together with identical responses. The network leveraged its numbers to create a collective voice, successfully securing funding for those organizations who attended the meeting.

The group South Central continues to meet today, with a similar structure and increased membership. The basic model of a regional HR network for the nonprofit sector has since spread across the province through various means described below. Overall regional networks exhibit relatively minor variations from one to the next, as suits each region. For the most part, the original regional network has provided a firm structure, seeding other peer networks which have grown and adapted to suit local contexts.

The information below collected from six regional networks outlines the current nonprofit HR network model, best practices and impacts.

A Model Spreads:

Since the formation of the first HR Network, there have been a diversity of ways that parallel regional DS HR networks have emerged, and continue to emerge, across Ontario:

1. Self-starting by people with HR responsibilities in an organization

    As described above, the very first HR network began when full HR positions were first introduced to the nonprofit sector. The network was born out of an interest in exploring common ground across distinct organizations with parallel needs.

    - In a similar way, other HR networks in different parts of the province have been started on the initiative of people in HR positions seeking a peer circle to connect into and draw from.
    - Self-starting networks typically start small and informally with meetings over coffee or lunch to discuss the potential, opportunity and form of a networking group

2. Organizations responding to a specific need

    Other networks started from Executive Directors recognizing an issue in the sector, and deciding to address it by pulling together an informal network.

    - The Ottawa DS HR Committee began when an informal networking group of Executive Directors identified an issue with sector recruitment. To address the challenge, the group of EDs decided to pull together a committee of HR staff from across their organizations. Together, HR staff and EDs from about 4-5 agencies worked to better understand and ultimately address the issue. Having resolved the recruitment issue, the network disbanded.
    - A few years later, HR leads from the organizations that had originally gathered decided that it would be useful to convene again for the general purpose of sharing information and supporting each other in their roles
    - Since then, the network has functioned without ED involvement. The networks work in parallel - the informal ED Network sometimes passes requests for information to the HR Network.

3. Sector Outreach & DS HR Strategy

While the networks are not formally a part of the DS HR Strategy, the DS HR Strategy recognizes the value that the networks provide. The DS HR Strategy supports new network formations and the growth of existing networks.

The DS HR Annual Forum has been running for 4 years as a part of the DS HR Strategy. The largest gathering for DS HR Professionals from across Ontario, the forum is a multi-day conference. Regional HR networks both contribute to and benefit from the DS HR annual forum.

- The Forum supports the profile of regional networks by integrating a Q&A session into conference programming.
- The regional networks support the forum by organizing the legal guest speaker for the conference.
- In addition to intentional efforts to make the regional networks visible, forum attendees naturally find peers in their regions, and the forum has even been the impetus for new networks to start up.

Outisde of the Annual Forum, Ann Bilodeau, the DS HR sector's first network coordinator and current member of the DS HR Steering Committee, offers to visit organizations in regions that are thinking about forming a network to share her experience of starting and coordinating a network and best practices for organizing.

A network of networks:

Recently, the DS HR Strategy has supported the coordination of network leads via teleconference a few times each year. These calls are an opportunity for network coordinators to connect with each other and to learn about what content other networks are covering. These calls give network coordinators ideas for content for their own meetings, and an opportunity to flow information from the provincial perspective back to their regional networks.

List of HR/DS HR Networks in Ontario:
(final list to be confirmed by Debbie Bray/Roxanne Bird)

Provincial Network

Recognizing the value of networks to flow information and support individuals to succeed in their roles, a provincial network now exists to connect regional coordinators. A semi-regular conference call gathers leads from across Ontario to report in on their network activity, and share back with their members.

Regional Networks:

South Central
Central East
Peterborough
Hamilton-Niagara
North
Ottawa
East

South (Southwest Region)
Central West (?)
Toronto

Network Size and scope:

"Our network membership is 20, but when you look at all the organizations that are represented at meetings, our network really represents thousands of workers. There is power in our numbers. We can easily attract good speakers, pool information and mobilize around issues as they come up."

- Nonprofit HR Network Lead

Size:

DS HR Networks range from 52 members (the province's original network - dating back to the early 90s) to 3-5 members for a network that is just getting started. Each network reported a steady increase in membership and participation over time.

All networks are larger online than in-person – for example, there may be 22 people on the network list, but fewer who actively participate in discussion threads, and only about 8 or 9 who attend meetings regularly.

When speakers or training are part of meetings, network meetings usually draw in more than HR-related positions, extending to EDs and other managers.

Network Growth:
   In addition to time, membership increases were attributed to word of mouth, active outreach through Informal ED networks and listservs, and the DS HR Annual Forum.

Size affects form and function:

In the early phase of a new HR network's development, focus tends to be more on developing the network's form than its content.

   As networks get started, they typically have few members and are mostly focused on recruitment and developing loose terms of reference to define the

purpose and parameters of the group for themselves and incoming members. Moving project ideas into action (e.g. a training bursary, organizing a guest speaker) has proven difficult with limited people and organizations involved.

Larger networks have an easier time mobilizing project ideas and attracting specialized, high profile speakers to attend meetings on topics of interest because of their sheer size.

This said, supporting network connectivity and depth of connection between members, however, becomes more difficult in a large network. Less time is available for organizational updates and troubleshooting at meetings.

The largest network in the province is now considering whether it would be valuable to break into smaller network groups to reduce travel time to meetings, and increase in the quantity of meetings and the quality of inter-personal connections within the network.

Scope:

Distance: Members travel a range of distances to attend in-person meetings – in a city like Toronto or Kitchener, a member may have the option to walk to a network meeting; in other areas, members may drive in to a meeting from up to 2 hours away.

Despite long travel distances, few networks use call-in options for meetings. Most networks deem the meetings' content too confidential and reliant on interpersonal connections to be suited to a conference call. When a speaker is involved networks may circulate presentation slides to members who were unable to attend.

Member Types:

Network membership typically comprises a mix of:

Full HR positions (e.g. HR Director, HR Assistant Director, HR Manager)
- o Full HR Positions typically exist in larger, well-resourced organizations

Executive Director or administrative positions with HR as a portion of their overall portfoilio
- o Tending to come from smaller, less resourced organizations, members with partial HR Positions are generally less well represented at meetings . Attending a meeting can take up more time than is available to spend on HR in a given week or month.
- o These network members tend to rely more on the email listserv, and/or will attend meetings on an as-needed basis (i.e. despite not being regular

attendees, if the organization is facing an HR challenge, the staff may choose to attend an upcoming meeting to seek advice) In this way, the regional networks are an important resource for smaller organizations – organizations in these situations can comfortably rely on the network for HR expertise and support.

Some network coordinators reported on the importance of maintaining the network meetings as spaces for HR-dedicated staff only.

Attributing the quality of the network to the safe space it created for peers to connect, coordinators recommended against having an HR staff attend a meeting *with* their Executive Director or supervisor. Having management present can stifle members' ability to ask for support and to be candid about organizational challenges. While speakers often attract other positions beyond HR to attend from an organization, most networks maintain the organizational updates/peer support portion of the meeting for HR-related staff only.

Network Types: DS HR Networks / Nonprofit HR Networks

Some networks limit membership to HR positions in the DS sector; others extend to any nonprofit interested in connecting around HR.

DS HR Networks:

Some networks found that extending the invitation to all nonprofits in the region to join the network diluted meeting content, generalizing discussions to the point of losing value for time. Limiting membership to DS HR professionals maintains a tighter content focus and encourages peer-to-peer support on DS-specific issues.
  o Speakers and training opportunities are sometimes reasons for pure DS HR networks to open particular meetings to other types of nonprofits.

Nonprofit HR Networks:

- Extending membership to all nonprofits has the benefit of increased membership and increased understanding of the local resources in one's area. Knowledge of other nonprofit operations has helped organizations with similar client-bases and overlapping needs and services connect into valuable community resources and build inter-organizational partnerships.

While the differences between HR in nonprofit organizations may be relatively subtle, HR in the for-profit sector is perceived distinct enough that it forms a boundary – no HR network includes members from for profit businesses.

Format and frequency of meetings:

Frequency:

HR network meeting frequency ranges from monthly meetings to biannual. Most but not all networks took a break from convening in the summer months due to holiday schedules and lower attendance.

Networks also convene informally in their regional subdivisions at the DS HR Annual Forum

"Our network prioritizes cutting to the chase, using simple language, and building trust. We do what we say we are going to do: we set and stick to meeting times; we bring in quality; and we always reserve time to listen to each other. No HR problem is silly; actively problem-solving together builds connections and adds value for members."
                                                            - Nonprofit HR Network Lead

Format:

Most networks are self-described as informal in nature. One network coordinator even attributed the success of their network to the fact that the HR gatherings are "not just another meeting."

Most meetings convene **face to face** with no call in option. Those networks with call in options were in the minority.

> One network reported offering a call in option with a caveat. Members are limited to calling in a maximum of 3 times over the course of a year. Other meetings must be attended in person. This restriction encourages a balance of in-person attendance as a means to cultivate relationships and trust within the network.

Meeting minutes are taken at a small minority of HR network meetings.

> Sharing challenges and organizational updates often surfaces confidential content that may not emerge if notes were being taken.

> Networks that take minutes also take care to respect confidentiality, limiting notes to more general items.

Crowd-sourced **agendas**:

> Most network coordinators invite members to contribute agenda items by email in advance of the meeting.

The main and consistent content at network meetings is the go-around of **organizational updates.**

> Updates typically appear on agendas as a standing item. Organizational updates help the network identify areas of overlap, opportunities to share experiences or collaborate (e.g. on updating or developing policies, new programs), seek advice on challenges, and learn about each other's work.
>
> Generally at least half of a network's meeting time is dedicated to sharing, discussing and troubleshooting around organizational updates.

In-person network meetings create a sense of intimacy, **confidentiality** and resulting depth of content that the networks' listservs do not generate.

> Most network leads cited the circle of trust that the in-person network creates as the network's core value. Some leads also identified a difference in the quality of content in online vs. in-person network communications. The in-person networking opportunities enable members to share complex problems, frustrations and sensitive HR situations, whereas online communications are typically limited to sharing resources, training opportunities.

Meeting locations vary by network – some groups rotate the host location across those member organizations with space and hosting capacity to make travel equitable for all members. Other networks find a consistent, central location is preferable.

- When location rotates, meeting hosts generally organize small snacks and beverages, and may support the coordinator with network communications in the lead up to the meeting.
- Some networks (e.g. South Central) have been meeting at the same location – the Kitchener Holiday Inn – for many years. Members are asked to pay a small due to support the costs of an external meeting space.

Meeting lengths vary from 2 hours to full day meetings. 2 hour meetings are mostly seen in networks that are small, and/or meet very frequently. The network that meets for a full day meets only 1-2 times per year. Most networks tend to meet between a half to full day, depending on whether an external speaker is brought in to supplement the networking portion.

Networking in between meetings:

In-person meetings create a foundation for members to stay in touch all year round through network listservs.

> While other HR Listservs are available and active through the province, e.g. OASIS (Ontario Agencies Supporting Individuals with Special Needs), they require a registration fee, and are much larger and less personal than the regional network listservs. Regional network listservs, while less intimate than in-person meetings, still provide a safe medium for members to ask for support without broadcasting their needs across the province.

As mentioned above, the DS HR Annual Forum is another opportunity for network members to connect in-person.

Network Coordination:

Most networks coordinators use **light-touch leadership**. Nevertheless, coordination, however light, is key to maintaining the networks.

Each network has a lead that is responsible for circulating and setting an agenda, and ensuring that meetings are scheduled and members are notified. Some networks have host organizations take responsibility for a given meetings' invitation and RSVP list. Leads reported this role taking only a few hours each month. As referenced above, network coordinators also connect into a province-wide call.

"The key to a thriving network is a passionate coordinator."
- Nonprofit HR Network lead

It is relatively rare for leadership to rotate. With the exception of one network, which has a two-year term for network coordinators written into a Terms of Reference, coordination leads switched only when staff changed positions.

Most networks operate without a dedicated **budget** as they require few if any financial resources to run. Coordinators generally did not feel that having a budget would make a relevant difference to the quality of the network.

Networks that do have a budget apply membership dues to external meeting space. Most often, speakers come to the networks without charge. As necessary, a network will ask for members to contribute to the cost of a speaker.

Two Key Challenges for Coordinators:

Overall, most coordinators felt their networks were simple to organize and effective resources for members and the sector at large.

When asked, network Coordinators reported difficulties in:

Confirming and maintaining meeting attendance
- Some networks have difficulty rallying member attendance as meetings compete for desk time. Network listservs are sometimes seen as an alternative to attending an in-person meeting. Organizations without full time HR positions have an especially difficult time with consistent meeting attendance.
    o STRATEGY: One network is taking a stricter approach to attendance to make network membership dependent on attendance at a minimum number of meetings

Shared leadership and ownership for networks
- While network leadership is light-touch, some coordinators felt the networks would have capacity to do more if more members were actively involved in leadership roles. Organizing professional development activities, for example, can take time – more of these would be possible if more members were willing to share the load of this work

Key Success Factors for HR Networks:

- For networks to get off the ground, an individual or small group must be committed to spearheading the effort and maintaining momentum
- Network coordinators exercise light-touch leadership, maintaining informal network structures

- No (or nominal) costs for networks to run keep barriers to entry low

- By maintaining a regular meeting schedule and communications, networks exhibit steady growth patterns over time

- In-person connections at network meetings cultivate trust and confidentiality among members

- Networks strike a balance between member-driven content, specialized speakers and trainings

- Flowing information, networks form unique hubs for members to contribute and co-develop knowledge and resources around HR issues

- When necessary, networks leverage a collective voice and pooling knowledge as a means to influence policy and the sector at large

- Networks provide multiple avenues for members to connect (regional meetings, provincial meetings, online)

- Networks position themselves as resources for the development of individual staff and for associated organizations, particularly for smaller organizations with limited HR resourcing.

- Recognition and promotion of the success of networks by the DS HR Strategy and the sector as a whole has contributed to the proliferation of networks, and a province-wide network to further support the growth and efficacy of regional networks

Recommendations:

Strategies for growth:

> To date, regional networks have not had an online presence - e.g. a description of the network or contact information on a website as a means of attracting prospective members. Networks looking to increase their membership may consider creating an online presence to increase their discoverability.

Utilizing provincial network calls as a resource for network development:

> While network coordinators finds provincial calls a useful resource for generating network content, some network coordinators expressed interest in dedicating a portion of the call time to discussing their shared roles, challenges, and insights in running a network.

Increasing Shared Leadership:

> Most networks do not have formal roles beyond the coordinator. Networks with membership fees may have a treasurer. Networks might consider creating more formal positions as an invitation for members to step into (e.g. Professional Development Lead, Special Projects Lead).

Balancing between network size and network focus:

Networks with very large or extended membership (beyond DS) might consider creating time for sector-specific subgroups to convene and connect as a part of the regular meetings (e.g. DS, assisted living)

When networks are forming and considering whether to form as a pure DS HR Network or a nonprofit HR network, they might consider the density of DS and non-profit organizations in a given region; existing networks might evaluate whether their current membership is interested in exploring an extended or narrowed network scope.

Key differences between networks and Organizations:

Networks have fundamentally different operating principles than the organizations that house their members. Groups looking to develop healthy network structures may find this chart a useful guide for organizing:

Network ~ Organization

Organization	Network
• In or out	• Loose boundaries allow many different perspectives
• Useful when problems are simple	• Useful when you don't know how to solve problem
• Clear chain of command and decision-making	• Focus on innovation, experimentation, and learning
• Focus on planning and goals	• Leaders encourage others to act and take initiative
• People assigned tasks	• No one can tell anyone what to do
• Powerful focused action	• Messy but can make breakthroughs and reach tipping points
• People need to agree, pressure to be alike, aligned	• Requires investment in new skills, processes, and mindset
• Not good for innovation or problem-solving	

Credit: June Holley, [Network Weaver Handbook](#)

Conclusion:

Regional HR networks take relatively few resources to run, and contribute to HR Professionals feeling supported in their roles. These networks offer a useful means for collaborative learning, trust building and opportunities to develop new ways of

addressing difficult situations. For smaller organizations without strong HR resources, the networks are an important resource to fill the HR gap.

The Province's DS HR Strategy has recognized DS HR Regional Networks as a valuable resource and model for individual DS organizations and the sector as a whole. In turn, this recognition has contributed to the generation of more networks to support the sector's organizations.

While rooted in the DS and HR worlds, this model of network organizing requires few resources and is easily transferrable to other groups looking to increase connectivity and information flow, enable peer supports and maximize resources.