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Wired: Evaluating
Settlement Online (WESO)



Working paper:

Client Preferences for In-person, Online, and Hybrid Services: Focus Group Results

Wired: Evaluating Settlement Online (WESO)

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Preamble

Wired: Evaluating Settlement Online (WESO) program in collaboration with Digital Consultant Marco Campana would like to share the results of Focus Groups conducted to assess the experiences of Settlement Service Provider (SPO) staff and newcomers with Hybrid Settlement Services. The Focus Groups were conducted in April 2022 with 60 SPO staff and 8 SPO clients.

The focus groups conducted with SPO representatives and newcomers shed light on the nuanced dynamics of hybrid service delivery. The findings emphasize the need for a personalized, newcomer-centric approach, recognizing the complexities and tailoring services to individual preferences. Addressing challenges related to digital divide, language barriers, and trust-building for online services will be crucial for successful hybrid service delivery in the evolving landscape of settlement services.

Special thanks to the participants who contributed to the Focus Groups. Acknowledgements are also extended to Marco Campana who played a significant role in analyzing and reporting on the Focus Group data, emphasizing the nuances and variation in newcomer preferences and motivations to use online services.





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Approach and Background

Fifteen focus groups were run with 60 SPO representatives. Two focus groups were run with eight newcomers. Participants were sent questions ahead of time to consider, which formed the basis for the focus group discussion.

SPO focus group discussion questions

How hybrid service delivery is working

1. How is the hybrid model working for clients and staff?
2. What benefits have you seen since the start of using the hybrid model?
3. Which clients have been more willing to receive hybrid services?
4. Which settlement services have been more successful in hybrid service delivery?

Challenges of hybrid service delivery

1. What aspect of settlement services do you find difficult to implement a hybrid delivery system for?
2. What challenges have arisen since the use of the hybrid model?
3. Which challenges should be a priority to address?
4. When it comes to providing settlement services, how would you evaluate the 'language barrier' as a potential difficulty for clients?

Newcomer focus group discussion questions

How hybrid service delivery is working

1. Do you see any benefits in completing a service online rather than in-person? If not, why do you think it is more comfortable to complete a service in person?
2. Even if you are not an online service user, do you think that, in the future, with the right instructions and technology knowledge, you will be able to complete service online?
3. Do you think that service staff are able to deliver equally accurate and complete services online as in-person?
4. What benefits do you see to online service delivery that are missing from in-person service delivery?



Challenges of hybrid service delivery

1. What do you think may be missing from an ideal online service delivery that makes you hesitant to access and use a service online?
2. If you were to prioritize the reasons for refusing an online service, which of these reasons would you say is causing it: safety/security, lack of technological knowledge, lack of technological devices (smartphones, etc.) and connections (Wi-Fi, home internet)
3. What concerns you the most when you think of receiving services online? Can you elaborate?
4. Please complete this: I am not sure if online service delivery can substitute or complement in-person services because ...
5. Do you think trust is an issue when it comes to online services?

Summary of themes

The word that perhaps best describes focus group perspectives (both SPO and newcomer) is nuance. There is no black and white, *either/or* when it comes to hybrid service delivery. It is *both/and*. For example, hybrid services are both convenient and a hardship. They are both more accessible and can create access confusion. Remote services are more accessible for newcomers with family, work, and other commitments that make it difficult to access services. They can also be difficult for newcomers with young children or other distractions in their home which makes it difficult to find private space or space to focus on a class or session. Some SPOs have seen increases in client participation and numbers online. Others have seen decreases.

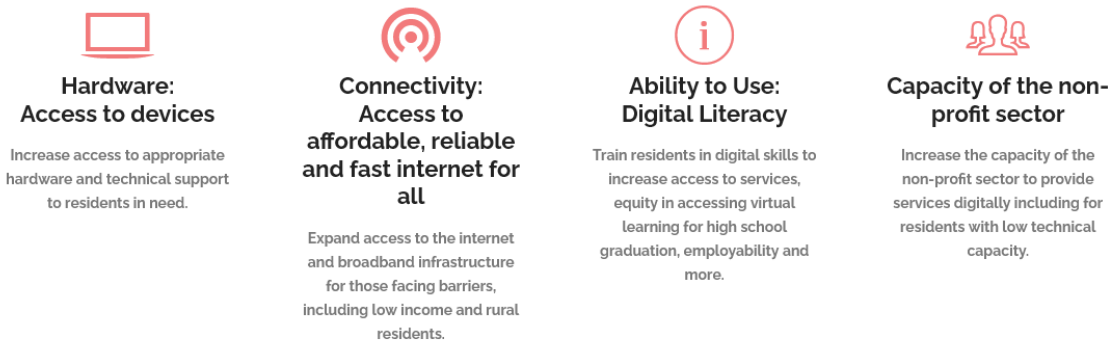
It has been challenging for women experiencing domestic violence to get help online when their partners control the technology. Getting them to in-person services increases safety and access to services. On the other hand, for women experiencing harassment, stalking, and violence outside the home, being able to work and access services remotely while in their home has meant less anxiety and more safety.

Stories and scenarios like these illustrate the nuances of this hybrid, in-person and online/remote service delivery. They also punctuate the importance of achieving the right mix in a newcomer-centric framework, ensuring access to services for everyone in the ways they want, need, and prefer.

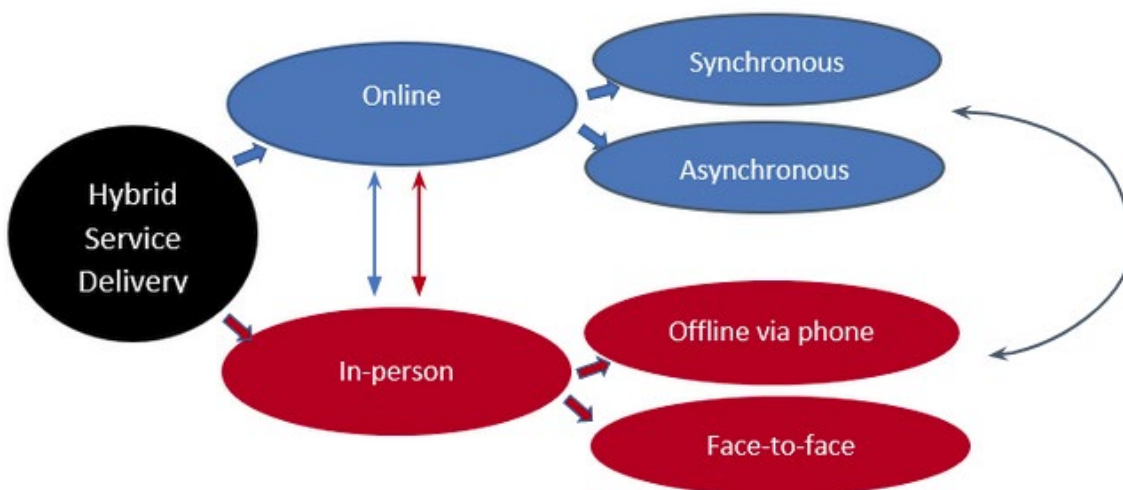
Where in-person is preferred and where online services have been beneficial

As outlined above, the preferred hybrid service model for both SPOs and newcomers is nuanced, emphasizing a 'no wrong door' approach. One that is tailored to a SPOs capacity but centred on newcomer capacity, preference, and digital navigation (broadly defined):





The preferred hybrid service model would offer not only pathways, but choice and access based on what SPOs understand about their newcomer clients. It would also offer the ability to move between in-person and online/digital service offerings based on that understanding and newcomer preferences. In these focus groups, the answer to the question of what type of services are better delivered online, in what format, and for what type of clients is a personalized mix based on understanding each newcomer’s preferences and abilities. Establishing the right mix of in-person and online services for each service intervention needs to be tailored to each newcomer and newcomer cohort (in group settings) being served. This means that one newcomer may prefer a 20% in-person/80% online split, while another may prefer 80% in-person/20% online. When one group cohort is offered it may be 50/50 for one group, it may change to 20/80 for another, depending on their preferences and abilities. There is a value for newcomers to be able to move seamlessly between online and in-person approaches, based on their preferences. This adds complexity for SPOs, but understanding and meeting newcomers where they are can increase service accessibility and impact.



There are themes that come up that indicate when in-person is preferred by both newcomers and SPOs. These are outlined below in the document, but include:



- Initial intake and assessment.
- Creating social connections and networks, allowing newcomers to meet each other in a more social way.
- Digital literacy training, in particular for newcomers with low levels of English, as well as literacy learners (who have literacy challenges in their mother tongue as well as English)
- Language challenges compounded by technical challenges. These do not necessarily include digital divide or literacy challenges, but the simple act of communicating online can be more intimidating or challenging for some, even when they are excellent communicators in person. Anxiety around technology-mediated communication comes up in the conversation as something to identify and address.
- It can simply be a simple preference for some newcomers and SPOs about how they are more comfortable in person.
- Form filling and sharing identification (SIN, UIC, PR Card, etc.) and personal documents (immigration forms, etc.)

General considerations

SPOs identified a number of differentiators for newcomers indicating service preferences:

1. Newcomers who want to get services virtually. These include professionals who may themselves be working remotely and have become accustomed to it.
2. Newcomers who lack access to technology, and some with higher needs, are not comfortable receiving services through technology; they prefer in-person services.

Newcomers added that the task-oriented parts of the service can be easily replicated online, but that they also prefer in-person for intake and assessment.

Newcomers also indicated that replicating the social and networking connections that occur naturally in-person with other newcomers have been difficult to replicate online. In some cases, it was possible to replicate these connections, but required SPOs actively creating the space that might happen more naturally in an in-person setting. Examples such as use of breakout rooms, time spent specifically to socialize, hosting social gatherings, such as celebrating a newcomer's birthday virtually all contributed to creating social connections. This speaks to the efforts required by SPOs to ensure that social connections are planned when services are provided online. It also speaks to the knowledge required by SPOs to be able to make this work. One SPO mentioned that it can feel like their role is not just teacher and subject matter expert, but entertainer as well, when working to create engagement. Social connections in-person tend to happen as a result of people being in the same place at the same time. A virtual session offers this synchronous reality, but the social aspects need to be created, offered, and managed in a much different way.



Filling forms/digital signatures

Form filling has been challenging for many newcomers and SPOs, regardless of digital literacy and device access. However, some SPOs pointed out this is where hybrid service delivery might shine. SPOs indicated that when helping newcomers with forms, a single form can typically be finished in one sitting if the worker is experienced, and the newcomer is prepared. If multiple forms are being filled out, it can take a few days, especially when clients do not bring all the necessary documents, etc., to meetings, resulting in service delays and extended timing. If pre-meeting packages and information could be created to better communicate what is necessary and why, providing clients with information before they come into the office, they can gather ahead of time and come in more prepared. This would make the in-person service smoother when they're prepared online before the service interactions. While this may appear to be an in-person service at first glance, it actually involves a hybrid delivery model. Staff work with clients remotely to prepare for the subsequent in-person meeting.

Many SPOs indicate having challenges with forms. Both having clients complete and sign SPO forms, but also government and other documents. This can be compounded when the primary client is youth and services require parental signatures. There are many struggles in getting forms signed, relaying messages to youth, and hoping they will be accurately relayed to parents. If families do not have devices, they may not be able to print, sign, or take clear pictures/scan and send them back. Currently, SPOs feel they need actual signatures on documents, which may not actually be the case from a legal and liability perspective. Education, along with best practices, would be useful here, as most are unsure about acceptable practices.

Some clients do not feel comfortable providing documents online or through email. Some SPOs have created password-protected links for clients to upload personal files on a secure site. Other options include a hybrid - online registration forms that are shorter and do not ask for secure information. Staff members add information and call clients to complete the intake.

On the other hand, some SPOs indicated that they have been able to share forms online and clients can fill them out on their own time. When there are language barriers that might impact a live interaction, newcomers have been able to take the time and use technology to translate areas that are unclear to them. They can then send the form back to a worker for review and to finalize it before submitting.

Identity security

There are also challenges when sharing secure identification such as PR Cards, UIC, SIN, or other information service providers ask for. With many online scams, many newcomers are aware of online security and when to share and not share documents. But not all SPOs need to get documentation from clients to ensure service eligibility as well as report client statistics. Governments are working on solutions, but they are currently cumbersome. For example, one SPO outlined how, in order for newcomers to access Provincially funded programs, clients must follow a two-step system. They contact the province directly, provide their SIN, then get an ID number to provide to the SPO to access services. It can build trust and confirm service legitimacy, but it also adds complexity, additional steps to access services, and friction, in particular because contacting the province means negotiating voice mail systems typically set up in English



only. Calling clients to explain registration situations and ID requirements takes time, as they need clarification on why an ID is needed. While many clients sign up after receiving the explanation, some do not.

Some clients are not comfortable sharing personal identification, but still want to join sessions and get the settlement information they need. This adds pressure to SPOs to provide service, but not be able to capture service statistics. At the same time, it means some SPOs do not share digital resources publicly, such as session video recordings, which can also add to information duplication in the sector, where SPO sharing could benefit all organizations.

Providing documentation needed to qualify for certain services requires devices (typically a computer to ensure digital compatibility), internet connectivity, and digital literacy. These can be challenges, in particular for newly arrived newcomers. Online services can be more challenging than for newcomers who have been here for longer. At the same time, technology is becoming increasingly crucial during the migration journey. Newly arrived newcomers may have higher-than-expected digital literacy, primarily focused on smartphones. This suggests the importance of assessing both client digital literacy at the point of intake and SPO capacity to serve newcomers where they are with their digital preferences.

Newcomer-nuances of digital literacy

Initial interactions with someone who has low digital literacy is important to establish trust and rapport building. SPOs agree that newcomers can be supported to move online and receive hybrid services, but that our sector needs to find ways to address the distrust of online, as well as ensuring that SIN and other IDs are kept private and secure.

The combination of low literacy (including in their mother tongue as well as English) along with digital challenges meant that some client groups were completely unable to access online services. Blended learning, for example in English classes, has worked for these students when they have the initial access to in-person classes, digital literacy training and support. This way, they can seamlessly shift online as they progress through English language levels. Over time, they are supported and more choices open up for how they can access classes.

An interesting example of the challenges in online classes involves students not fully grasping the importance of muting and paying attention when someone is specifically called upon. In a traditional classroom, an instructor can point to a student, but in an online setting, even when individuals are addressed by name, staff indicated that many people do not comprehend and end up speaking simultaneously. Technology challenges can also play a role in the confusion. For example, if someone has an internet bandwidth challenge it impacts comprehension and timing. Some students/clients turn off cameras, staff can't read body language, no additional cues to language, which diminishes interactions, lower levels of participation. It can be harder to get people to talk. Some SPOs have established rules for cameras on during sessions but it doesn't always work.



Most SPOs agreed that providing digital literacy training is a challenge online. They much prefer and found it more beneficial for newcomers to provide the training basics in-person. As a newcomer progresses, they might find additional online support and training beneficial. But initially in-person computer and digital literacy training appears to have been more effective.

Services for higher need clients are more difficult online, especially when there are digital literacy and digital divide challenges.

Benefits of online

Most newcomers and SPOs agree that remote service delivery has had many benefits, for both newcomers as well as staff. In particular, transportation is typically an issue regardless of location, but especially in rural or small centers. One of the benefits of online services has been accessibility. Community members can connect and receive services without having to travel or be asked to travel. This includes an ability to serve clients outside of the typical catchment area. This can be most useful and important for services that may not be available locally due to funding and demographic constraints. An example is small francophone populations in rural/small centres who have been able to connect with and receive services in French from neighbouring communities or larger municipalities.

As well, SPOs have been able to hire and work with employees who may work outside the immediate area. In some cases, employees have had some local connections, but live far enough out of the area that working for the SPO would have been unlikely in the past. Remote work has expanded access to SPO talent.

Where SPOs have been able to incorporate online scheduling, they have found many efficiencies when it comes to scheduling and rescheduling appointments.

Services can continue being delivered and can be accessed from anywhere in the community. SPOs in rural communities with sufficient internet bandwidth identified an increase in access for newcomers who typically have to travel to other centres to receive services. SPOs in urban centres also indicated that when weather is an issue (such as cold or heavy snow in Winter, but also other inclement weather), having online options increased access and participation.



Additional priority themes identified by focus group participants'

Building trust and rapport

Both newcomers and SPOs indicated that establishing trust and rapport with online-only intake and initial interactions can be more difficult.

Some service providers also indicate the in-person intake is preferred in order to make initial connections and build trust. There are nuances here related to the fully remote/work from home challenges as well. Establishing trust from blocked phone numbers, or video calls with staff members who are at home, may have blurred video backgrounds, etc., can make it more difficult for newcomers to trust that staff are who they say they are or work in the SPO. Newcomers have heightened awareness of online scams and phishing and may feel more comfortable with an office background in a video call, or a call coming from a number that identifies the SPO. However, once initial intake is done and trust is established, moving services online for those newcomers who can access or prefer it works well.

SPOs indicated that in some cases they not only prefer in-person intake, but that client counselling can be easier in person. Some newcomers do not open up easily online (even video or audio chats) and staff need to be able to read body language. Some clients do not want to attend video meetings or turn off their video. For some staff, deeper conversations and connections can be harder and take more time when it is just audio only, such as phone.

A Newcomer suggested how IRCC could help build trust by immediately helping newcomers register with SPOs, before landing or at the point of entry. They suggested making it an opt out system where newcomers are automatically connected through the immigration process. Having the connection and registration come through IRCC lets newcomers know that the services exist and how they're helpful. It's a support system, even if newcomers do not access them. The timing of the information and interaction is also important to get newcomer's attention, etc. Dedicated phone support, such as a 1-800 help line was suggested as being useful for newcomers to be able to call for quick questions and answers. They can ask family and friends, but having an authoritative phone number for quick answers would be beneficial. This service could also take the form of a chatbot. Newcomers just need to be aware of it, understand how to access it, and recognize its usefulness.



Language barriers

Language barriers seem connected to anxiety using technology. Even newcomers with high English skills can be nervous when using technology. Technology issues can throw them off, and SPOs can't observe full body language, which many believe contributes to a lack of rapport and trust. Many indicate a preference to see the whole person for initial contact/intake. This priority is mirrored by newcomers.

Language itself is not necessarily the barrier. As outlined in other themes below, language challenges are usually created or compounded by other issues, such as poor audio, slow internet connections, etc. However, most SPOs agreed that serving clients with lower English levels (CLB 3 and below) has been more of a challenge online.

Digital divide

Digital divide issues (access to devices, adequate bandwidth, digital literacy) comes up as the biggest challenge. Addressing the digital divide means SPOs are moving and have moved into new areas of work. For example, in a hybrid service system, SPOs find that they not only have to be subject matter experts helping newcomers navigate the usual systems but are also digital systems navigators and technical support providers now. Some SPOs provide digital device lending libraries, moving into a new procurement and logistical space.

Where newcomers may have access to a device, it tends to be a smartphone. Most SPOs have found it challenging to serve newcomers who only have a smartphone in group sessions. Many applications are not as mobile friendly, or even if they are, are harder to use for engagement and interaction, such as polls, shared screens and whiteboarding during a Zoom call. This was confirmed by newcomers who indicated that many of them attended classes or sessions and accessed workshops through their phones. It presented more of a challenge during online interactions. Some participants got lost on their phones and weren't able to participate as effectively.

This speaks to the digital capacity of SPOs as much as it does newcomers. If services are not offered in technically accessible ways, newcomers who do have digital devices and bandwidth may still not be able to participate. As well, SPOs need time to create service interventions that meet the technology newcomers are using. That takes time, knowledge, and potentially completely reworking service interventions. In the interim, it is important to capture newcomer digital divide nuances that include newcomers who may appear to lack challenges (i.e. they have smartphones, adequate internet connectivity, and digital literacy) but still face difficulties accessing online services because SPOs are providing interactions that are not compatible with the device's newcomers are using.

On the other hand, for 1-on-1 service delivery, smartphones have been adequate as a tool to receive services on. Most newcomers have become accustomed to using Zoom, and WhatsApp comes up frequently as a tool used by many. At the same time, many SPOs have created materials to tackle client digital literacy - templates and how-to's to share with clients, step by step how to do things - make it



simple so they can understand and follow the steps, intentionally use easy words, clear language, to help guide them easily to take the steps, etc.

As SPOs are able to move back into offices for service delivery, some have resources to support clients with digital literacy training or access to computers such as through computer resource areas. Others have been able to set up small device lending libraries, however, these reach only a small number of newcomers.

Where there may be low cost internet access and access to devices for newcomers with low income, there are challenges to access these types of programs. This comes in part from newcomers as well as SPO knowledge of programs, as well as program eligibility, and additional requirements. For example, the federal government Connecting Families initiative is available to: “Families who currently receive the maximum Canada Child Benefit (CCB) and seniors who currently receive the maximum Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) are eligible for this initiative.” The government contacts those eligible directly, and there is no application process. This means that a newcomer must first apply for the CCB and receive the maximum benefit. Once they are eligible, “eligible households must receive a letter from the Government of Canada. This letter will contain an access code that they will need to sign up for the initiative. The access code will be valid for the entire duration of the initiative if the household remains eligible.” There is no other way to apply for this program. It appears to be unclear during the CCB application process if an eligible recipient is receiving the maximum amount. It is also unclear if an applicant must first go through a Canadian tax season/income tax report before being eligible. The bottom line is that programs that could potentially offer support may be complex and challenging for newcomers to navigate.

Even when some aspects of the digital divide are resolved, such as access to devices using lending libraries, other issues remain. For example, providing devices to newcomers also means providing them with training and technical support. Many organizations have worked closely with libraries which act as central hubs for people who do not have devices or high-speed internet to help bridge the digital gap. However, it can take time and when services are only digital there can be a lag between getting devices and actually receiving services. This means creating new services in the SPO or coordinating with other community agencies. Either way, it requires time and capacity to implement.

The digital divide is seen as a broader societal issue that cannot be solved in a short period of time. It requires a long-term solution which our sector must be part of. SPOs need to keep in mind that it's long term and has to complement other skill development and advanced programming to help newcomers in many ways, including smoother overall transition into society.

Challenges of boundaries and time

For a few SPOs who must use personal smartphones, there are privacy and boundary challenges. Many SPOs do not have policies about response turnaround times and receive messages from clients outside of office hours. In some cases, service providers respond to these messages. In other cases, they wait until they are working office hours. It can be stressful for both newcomers and service providers when boundaries are unclear, especially given the immediacy of digital communication.



Interestingly, one SPO indicated that their pre-arrival services have turnaround time policies, but many organizations they refer clients to do not. It can take longer for clients to register with local programs after hand off from pre-arrival. There is a need for more seamless hand off from pre to post arrival services. This could include interoperable client tracking/management systems where client records and information can also be seamlessly shared to avoid entirely new intake processes that duplicate information already collected. There is a need to have common timelines and turnaround times across the sector to meet and manage client expectations and ensure consistency.

Client privacy and distraction vs convenience

Both newcomers and SPOs indicated that newcomers' access to quiet, uninterrupted spaces to meet, attend online classes, etc., can have an impact on a newcomer's ability to focus, be present, learn, and engage. This suggests a privacy concern that is not technical but must be kept in mind in service design and delivery.

On the other hand, both newcomers and SPOs indicated they like the convenience of being able to access services from home, especially for those with family responsibilities or small children in the home. Not having to commute saves time, money, and allows some newcomers to access services that they might not have otherwise been able to access.

Assessing clients' digital divide/preferences

Most organizations do not appear to have formal questions about digital literacy or digital preferences at the point of intake. This is a missed opportunity to understand newcomer needs/assets, as well as collect data to build towards service interventions.

Some staff sought to understand newcomer technology preferences and adjust to them. In other cases, newcomers were expected to adjust to the technologies and tools that SPOs were using.

Some SPOs indicated that they plan to identify preferences for each service they provide. This includes incorporating questions about preferences during intake and orientation sessions

One SPO story illuminates the perils of making technology choices without centering newcomers. Their organization chose an integrated service platform that made sense in terms of efficiency. However, clients found it cumbersome and difficult to use and adjust to. The SPO re-evaluated and moved back to previous service tools that newcomers were more familiar and comfortable with.

At the same time, others suggest that it might make sense for the sector to choose and use a common service platform. It would be useful to train everyone, as well as orient newcomers to the platform, bringing economies of scale, including having everyone trained on and using common tools, etc. For some programs where staff had no choice for which platform to use, they have found that SPO technology choices do not always work. For example, for a primarily smartphone-using client group, services may not be mobile friendly, only work in specific browsers, etc. Some have accessed other tools that do work with newcomers and emphasize the need to be able to accommodate newcomer choices, preferences, and digital realities. This can pose a challenge to SPOs that do not have the internal capacity or policies to be



nimble with technology choices. It can also mean that technologies may be used by front line staff without the knowledge of management, or that adhere to strict privacy/confidentiality and security protocols necessary in some interactions with newcomers.

There are many reasons to understand why someone might want or not want to access services in a particular way, whether in-person or online. SPOs agreed that trauma-based sensitivity when it comes to digital/hybrid service delivery will be essential for all SPOs to learn about and operationalize.

Online insecurity and anxiety

SPOs noted an interesting phenomenon when it came to technology causing communication challenges. This included technical problems such as audio/video lag/buffering, unstable internet connections, poor audio. However, even when the technology was not a barrier, SPOs indicated that some newcomers, even those with high levels of English, became difficult to communicate with. They also noted that they themselves found technology-mediated interactions a challenge that they did not experience with in-person services. Focus group participants agreed that there seemed to be some additional layer of anxiety with technology-mediated communication in English for ESL newcomers that was not present in the same way in person. Some newcomers seemed nervous about something going wrong, having to navigate technology, adding additional anxiety about tech that will impact their communication and learning online.

Interestingly, Francophone service providers and others serving newcomers in their mother tongue did not experience these same challenges. SPOs discussed the importance of language in service interactions. Services in other languages create additional nuances of service access, online as well as in person. SPOs agreed that language can put clients at ease when we recognize the distractions of being online and the importance of recognizing the limitations of the environment we're in and what the barriers might be. SPOs agreed that discussing these challenges with newcomers is important. It helps put them at ease and builds rapport differently when online. Failure to address these challenges can create anxiety.

According to focus group participants, translation technology can be helpful and has been useful, but it is not yet at the point where it can fully replace native language speakers. While Google Translate can assist at times, the technology is not perfect and can be limiting. This limitation extends beyond online interactions. For instance, one SPO described a colleague using Google Translate to aid in a service intervention during an in-person meeting with a family. It is another nuanced example of how technology can assist but might facilitate an in-person interaction more seamlessly than it does online.

Engagement online

An equal number of SPOs indicated increased numbers and higher participation with online services as those who reported lower numbers and decreased engagement when providing services online. There are many factors that impact success, but this split also speaks to the importance of SPOs getting the service mix right in a hybrid delivery model.

SPOs indicated ongoing challenges with engagement in online group sessions with all types of clients. Newcomers are not always engaged; some turn on their cameras when they want to say something, but



most of them do not. SPOs are not sure if they're paying attention; they find they must continuously check in during workshops. Some SPOs indicated that they believe this is due to Zoom and online service fatigue. Others are not sure if they can provide group services in more engaging ways, pointing to additional professional development support. This is an area worth delving into in more detail to determine how online group sessions can be made more engaging or if there are other challenges, such as at-home distractions, etc.

Some SPOs suggested that their experience suggests that some newcomers didn't take online services as seriously or were not as committed to remote services. There did not seem to be the same level of accountability as they might feel when in person. Newcomers suggested that this depended on the nature of the service, as well as how engaging or skilled a service provider might be when providing online services. For many, the additional accessibility has created more engagement and shortened service timelines. At the same time, newcomers indicated that when they registered for in-person services or sessions they felt compelled to go and attend. When a session was run online, they also noted that participation dropped more easily. For example, there was a notable drop off in webinars, which were perceived as more of an optional event.

One newcomer suggested that beyond online services, a platform could be created where newcomers can meet others, for networking and social connections.

Again, nuance. While there are barriers to remote/digital services, there are also barriers to in-person services that the sector has not adequately addressed over time. The pandemic has illustrated that digital is possible, and even desirable for some newcomers in specific service cases. For example, one SPO outlined how one client group found online services more accessible while another struggled. As they've moved back to in-person services, the situation has reversed. The client group that responded well to online services is not accessing in-person services. This speaks to the need for a fully functioning hybrid service delivery model that can meet the needs and preferences of all newcomers, providing choice and seamless service accessibility.

Some SPOs indicated that with the addition of online services, staff can see more people in a day. They mentioned that being more flexible with the times and ways services are offered makes it easier and more convenient for some clients. When there is less flexibility (i.e. online only), some clients do not show up to online meetings. As discussed above, for some, there is not the same sense of obligation;1 online does not always carry the same importance. SPOs haven't identified why this might be the case.

Accessing sector knowledge

It was interesting to hear, and confirm with various participants, that pre-arrival staff members' knowledge was generally not formally accessed when the sector shifted to remote work, including within their own organizations.

Focus groups discussed the lack of research on the potential for seamless transfer of remote clients from pre-arrival to post-arrival SPOs offering hybrid and remote service. Pre-arrival clients have already been remote/digital clients. Post-arrival services offered online offer continuity in service delivery, along with



additional options for newcomers to access in-person services they prefer. This does not appear to have been evaluated or researched in a meaningful way by the sector.

At the same time, staff with more digital literacy and knowledge informally became digital navigators and peer support for other staff throughout the past 2 years.

Rural service providers feel more connected, that it takes less work to build relationships, and they're able to collaborate and share work together more than previously by using technology.

Training and professional development

While some staff received training and ongoing professional development to ensure they were comfortable and proficient using the tools their organization chose, many indicated that training and upskilling was left up to them and their colleagues.

One organization indicated that they have successfully created an onboarding process for remote work and digital service delivery that includes a peer support system. Existing staff work with and support new staff as they learn to use technology in their work with the community and newcomers. Part of this includes the recognition that digital may provide efficiencies in a number of areas but can also require additional staff time. For example, while one staff member facilitates an online session, another staff member is present and available during the session to provide technical support and troubleshooting for participants.

In some SPOs this has resulted in formal Digital Navigator positions. The Digital Navigator role is to coordinate, administer and lead orientations for new clients, to ensure they are able to access online courses and services. They also provide support to staff colleagues in the use of learning platforms and recommended technologies. In smaller SPOs, the Digital Navigator is becoming part of everyone's role, with different and inconsistent results.

Some provincial umbrella associations and others have provided various training opportunities, but there is an overall lack of cohesion and comprehensiveness to the training.

Some SPOs indicated how it has been stressful for some staff to be switching back and forth between in person and online. It can be stressful and throws them off their workflow. It is possible that additional supports for staff would be useful here.

Some SPOs have implemented HyFlex service models for language or group sessions, where a facilitator serves people in-person and online at the same time. This has proven to be a challenge, when there are technical issues, or staff or clients do not have adequate technology such as audio equipment, which can impact comprehension. Staff indicate that running online groups requires more of a performing role to keep participants interested and engaged. It is more tiring for staff.



All of these examples speak to the changing role of front-line workers. Among other roles, staff are expected by clients to be able to help with technical troubleshooting and orientation. It is a natural consequence of working more with technology in service delivery. This takes more knowledge and time. Few are trained in this emerging role. Most find it easier to provide newcomers with digital literacy challenges help on a one-on-one basis or in person.

Other SPOs spoke to the challenges of team building remotely, indicating that they felt closer when they worked in person. Social aspects of the workplace were harder to replicate online. For example, the natural connections, sharing, and conversations that happen in-person have been difficult to replicate online.

Overall, there is a sense that clients need pre-service support before accessing specialized online services, such as digital assessment and onboarding, to overcome technical challenges. This includes building their confidence in using technology. Some SPOs have established these supports, while for many, it remains ad hoc.

Being flexible and able to shift between technologies is a challenge for SPOs but is necessary. Having a technology 'Plan B' has become important, such as moving from Zoom to Google Meet. It also means being able to explore and master other tools to align with client preferences. It has proven effective when staff receive basic training on tools and are given the time for trial and error, especially as the technology preferences of clients change. Digital Navigators, who work with both clients and staff, play an important role in helping staff master new tools

French language resources

Francophone SPOs indicated that there are not as many useful resources in French as in English. They want to ensure that there are adequate resources for the French newcomer community; specialty resources in the community that are Francophone and where to access them in the community or online. As previously discussed, Francophone SPOs also indicated that online services have allowed them to expand and create access to services for Francophones who live in smaller populations where local French-language services may not be available to newcomers.

Knowledge sharing

SPOs have been able to adapt quickly to changing conditions. SPOs spoke about sector resilience, how the sector puts client best interests at heart, at the centre. But they need support for those adaptations. As one SPO put it, they're learning on the fly - building the plane while flying - everyone left to their own devices. They see a need for more training and support for frontline staff.

Some indicated that this could include funding or training to deliver services online, to translate information quickly, phone interpretation for remote clients, more networking opportunities for different SPOs so they can learn from one another and collaborate when needed. Flexibility during COVID was important, allowing SPOs to move resources as needed. The learning from that experience should continue as the hybrid model evolves.



SPOs are creating how-to instructions in documents and videos to support newcomers. However, there is duplication happening that could be addressed by more sector sharing. SPOs mentioned that additional collaboration where they share and access materials, sector learning, and a platform to share documents and resources would be useful. Some indicated it would be useful to have a single platform for the sector to use to both serve newcomers as well as share resources. The efficiencies and economies of scale would be useful to train everyone on consistent service technology, as well as orient newcomers to the platform to create common tools, shared content and more sector connections.

Flexibility and connections

Running online sessions/webinars has allowed SPOs to record sessions to provide after a live event. This has been useful for participants who may need/want to review presentations after. It has also given SPOs content to share with other newcomers who may not have attended. Many SPOs are building up libraries of video and other content.

Pre-arrival service providers have been able to help clients make connections with employers, mentors, and newcomers before arrival to support their employment process. Using LinkedIn, online job fairs, and other online networking approaches, these newcomers benefit from those connections and perspectives when they land.

SPOs also indicate that moving online has provided flexibility, allowing them to speak to industry partners from across the country more easily; not just collaborating, but also learning from each other. They have been able to plan joint events with organizations in other cities, for the benefit of local newcomers.

Remote and hybrid work set up

With the fully remote work experience, some staff are interested in building some flexibility into schedules to have hybrid workforce along with hybrid service delivery. Many staff indicated they would prefer to work from home, as it works for shifting schedules, family circumstances, and flexibility for clients accessing services outside of typical office hours. The conversation takes place at higher management levels in most cases, not necessarily fully involving front-line staff. As one SPO put it, it can be tricky with large organizations to meet everyone's desire for flexibility because of different program models, different scheduling needs, and trying to find the right mix of different levels of in-person and virtual service. For new staff who started working fully remotely during the pandemic, hybrid just makes sense from their perspective.

SPOs are looking for the best way to accommodate everyone - staff, clients, and management - to build a system that works for everyone. As one SPO put it, work still needs to be done. Questions remain about what the best mix of in-office and remote work is for front-line workers and organizations to show work is being done, clients are being served, clients are meeting outcomes, etc.

