

# Evaluation of Socio-Professional Integration Programs beyond Traditional Indicators: the Participants' Perspective

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*Abstract— Beyond the quantitative evaluation of the success of integration enterprise programmes (financial profitability and placement rate of participants) there is a striking and meaningful experience for the participant, but its evaluation can be difficult. It is in this context that this qualitative research was carried out. Interviews with 11 employees and 15 participants involved in integration programmes were conducted. A content analysis identified four criteria considered meaningful for the participants: the development of employability, integration into employment, but also the development of a normal and balanced lifestyle as well as the development of personal and relational skills. The results also highlighted two significantly different poles of this evaluation: the external pole (which includes all the expectations generally associated with participation in an integration program) and the interiority pole (composed of objectives and changes considered important for the participant himself). This evaluation method thus makes it possible to more accurately reflect the impact of the integration experience on the participant, which goes beyond employment to include a social integration component. The output of this approach takes the form of a proposal for criteria and indicators of success in socio-professional integration.*

*Keywords: Employment, exteriority, interiority, program evaluation, socio-professional integration.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Integration enterprises stand out from other organizations by the adoption of a mode of functioning, a mission and values that promote occupational integration [1]- [3]. Through state funding that is only partial, they thus combine organizational objectives of profitability and a social mission focused on the development of employability, thus offering an alternative dropping out for those left out inside the market employment. Composed mainly of young people [2], [4] who have little work experience [2], without a diploma [5] and sometimes with functional limitations [6] the population thus targeted risks being excluded of the labour market for a prolonged period. However, the consequences documented in connection with such exclusion are observed at the health level and financial and would be moreover, amplified by the general erosion of available social safety nets and the duration of exclusion from the labour market. [7]-[11]

A number of studies have already documented the importance of the internship programs of these integration companies for those who are threatened with such exclusion, who find it a source of income and an opportunity to develop their employability [1], [6]. Some also deal with the operation of these companies and more specifically how they combine the financial imperatives of the organization and the specific needs of interns, but also the challenges they face in the current context [1], [12]. It emerges that these companies have developed a particular mode of operation that makes it possible to achieve a certain productivity while offering trainees the development opportunities, support and

valuation they need to build a positive, motivating work experience that serves as a springboard for a return to school or the job market.

### Beyond statistics: assessment of exclusion

Traditional program evaluations include statistics on the proportion of participants who, in the months following the end of the integration course, obtain and maintain employment [13]-[20]. It should be recognized that this approach is in line with the objective of these programmes to facilitate the sustainable introduction of participants into the labour market and that it is an adequate way of confirming that the adverse consequences of exclusion from the labour market are avoided. Nevertheless, existing evaluations are far from sufficient or adequate to paint a reliable picture of the impact of these integration programs [21]. On the one hand, obtaining and maintaining an employment relationship can be influenced by various variables exogenous to it, sociological or economic for example [6], which means that it is a very imperfect indicator of the quality of insertion. On the other hand, the presentation of a simple proportion is clearly insufficient to account for the psychosocial development and personal growth of participants, which according to some authors are essential for assessing the quality of an integration pathway [1], [2], [22]. However, when we consider that it is this development that allows the participant to adapt in a sustainable way to the constraints generally associated with employment and life in society, it seems problematic that tools to assess it are still not available and used in conjunction with employment placement

statistics. However, they would be particularly useful, whether to guide the participants' progress by identifying along the way what they need or to measure this important dimension of the benefits attributable to the integration processes within the more formal evaluation of these programs.

This assessment of professional integration begins with consideration of its impact on the beneficiaries, which first requires an understanding of the problem it targets. Indeed, beyond what the statistics can convey, let us remember that it is a real person who suffers all the consequences associated with long-term unemployment as mentioned above. Thus, people who need an integration traineeship often have personal difficulties which go beyond the sphere of the world of work and which are accentuated by the experience of long-term unemployment. This means that socio-professional integration companies are aimed at a clientele with problems integrating into the labour market, including young people with little education, who are often also socially and professionally disadvantaged. Integration enterprises then aim to counter this double dropout, that of the labour market and that of society [23]. Trottier [6] points out that training to obtain skills that can be used in employment is necessary, but that it is insufficient to obtain and maintain employment. To fulfil the mission entrusted to them, integration companies must therefore take participants where they are and support them in their rehabilitation and personal growth efforts.

It is in this context that this research project proposes to paint as complete a picture as possible of the positive effects that these integration internships can have for the participants who benefit from them. Through this approach, the objective is to consider both the better-known benefits associated with employability and those that are rather focused on fundamental individual development allowing a good functioning both in society and in business. To achieve this, an exploratory approach deployed with the actors closest to the integration experience is proposed, while paying particular attention to the social development of the participants.

### **The integration process**

Through the reflections and definitions of integration proposed by Trottier [6] and Allard and Ouellette [14], a distinction must be made between the process of integration of an individual and the internship he may have to follow in an integration company. The integration process described therein ends when the individual's employment situation satisfactorily stabilizes and includes all stages (development, job search and others) leading to it. By understanding integration in this way, the integration internship is only one tool among others aimed at achieving the individual's professional objectives, which are also bound to evolve along the way [6]. This role – that of a resource rather than that of a goal – thus implies that the objective of the internship cannot be reduced to obtaining a job, but rather involves the development of the individual so that he or she can later

achieve it.

In this context, Vincens [24] stresses that integration can be seen in two ways. The first, which corresponds to the pole of exteriority, puts forward a definition and objectives are imposed on all the individuals concerned without the opinion of the latter being taken into consideration, while the second, namely the pole of interiority, focuses rather on the objectives that the individual establishes himself, which make then more meaning for him and which probably correspond more to what he conceives as a success for his own insertion. Going in the same direction, Vultur [19] indicates that the fulfillment by a social activity, the meaning of this activity as well as the free flow given to creativity are revealed as important elements of representations of integration. For some disengaged young people, integration is therefore not only an economic process since it integrates other dimensions of life. The objectives resulting from the pole of exteriority would then have very little meaning and could even harm the integration process as a whole and encourage dropping out if they were imposed too firmly in a case such as this.

These objectives are also reflected in practice, since occupational integration is composed, according to Fournier, Béji and Croteau of development activities, the elaboration or adjustment of a professional life project and the search for a job [25]. Guy [16] sees it as a major component in terms of socialization and identity construction, while Allard and Ouellette [14] see it as a question of integration into the social and work environment.

Taken together, this vision of integration, activities and objectives of existing programs all converge to emphasize that program evaluation must include the progress made by the individual rather than simply collecting statistics on obtaining and maintaining employment. It is in this context that this research project proposes to focus on the benefits of an integration approach.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

In accordance with the conceptualization of the pole of interiority put forward, it is through the direct consultation of individuals involved in an integration process that these benefits are explored. This approach is therefore part of a constructivist current by giving value to people's experiences and their perception of their reality, their experience.

The fieldwork was carried out with clients who participate in the Program d'entreprises d'insertion socioprofessionnelle of a non-profit organization located in Quebec that sells products and offers various services. This organization manages three service businesses that are administered separately at the business level and together as part of the social and professional programs of trainee employees. The three companies have the same objectives, but the level of supervision and the pace of training are different.

During their stay with the company, trainee employees are paired with a regular employee who acts as a technical trainer.

Trainees receive the same treatment as regular employees and clients cannot distinguish between staff members and trainees. Moreover, none of the enterprises is identified as an *integration enterprise*.

**Participants**

Within this environment, 15 former trainee employees who participated in an integration program and 11 permanent employees were met. The former trainee employees were between the ages of 18 and 26 and 80% of them were single. The group consisted of seven women and eight men and of the fifteen participants, only two claimed to have completed their general secondary education, while 80% claimed to have a good state of health. In terms of income, one participant indicated that he had none and only one person indicated that he earned more than \$25,000 per year. Three participants stated that they had never worked before the start of the integration internship, while 10 of them have one year or less of experience and only five have already worked for more than one year, all within one or more cumulative jobs. The 11 employees in the second group consulted are composed of five technical trainers, two integration officers and four people in management positions.

**Data collection and analysis**

Data collection was conducted primarily through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide with open-ended questions allowing participants to develop their answers has been developed for each of the groups, trainees and permanent staff. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and then analyzed. Nine participants also gave us their consent to access their records. Interns also completed a general and professional information form. Analysis of transcripts and extracts from participants' files as well as the assignment of interview excerpts to the various categories identified were performed using QSR NVivo qualitative research software. Using the reports produced, we did both an analysis of the frequency of occurrence of certain criteria within participants' stories and files, as well as a

qualitative analysis of the content. The coding was checked by a second researcher. Triangulation of data ensured good validity of results.

**III. RESULTS**

All the information collected as part of the data collection has made it possible to develop a better understanding of what it means, in practice, to succeed in the context of an integration course, which corresponds to the poles of interiority and the pole of exteriority.

Overall, the benefits thus identified and attributed to the integration process go beyond the pole of exteriority as anticipated, but still include some of its components. These are particularly present when it comes to integration and integration into employment, where obtaining a stable job is considered. Most of the elements associated with the perception of successful integration, both among employees and trainees, nevertheless imply the improvement and stabilization of behaviours, social situation and cognitions (intentions, perceptions) that trainees have and which are not necessarily directly related to employment. This means that from the point of view of the pole of interiority, the social aspect seems particularly important.

Through this portrait, it then becomes possible to bring together the main components of should involve the success of socio-professional integration. Indeed, although these are components of the pole of interiority which implies that specific needs may be different from one participant to another, four main criteria nevertheless emerge as generally important and applicable in different ways to individual cases. These are shown in Table 1, along with indicators that can be used to apply them to a real situation. From one participant to another, priorities and the way in which the development of these four criteria is carried out can likely vary significantly. Nevertheless, among the 27 participants in the study, these inclusive criteria appeared to be particularly important and make it possible to better understand what is the success of socio-professional integration.

**Table 1.** Typology of criteria for success in socio-professional integration

Criteria	Indicators	N	Examples
<b>Development of a normal and balanced lifestyle</b>	Modification or acquisition of healthy lifestyle habits	7	Get up early, eat, buy groceries, manage your budget and dress appropriately.
	Solving personal and family problems	6	Experiencing family conflicts, bereavement, finding housing and furnishing it.
	Resolution or control of health problems (physical or mental)	4	Quit drugs or alcohol, take medication, visit doctor and health professionals.
<b>Development of personal and interpersonal skills</b>	Determination with regard to work	8	Perceive work in a positive way in order to avoid the use of social assistance.
	Soft skills required in the labour market	31	Have good relationships with colleagues and boss, work in a team.
	Competences for action and achievement	24	Be motivated for the accomplishment of tasks, have concern for order and quality, take initiatives, be punctual, respect regulations.

	Support and Service Competence	15	Customer service orientation, ability to communicate with customers.
	Competence in personal effectiveness	32	Develop a good self-perception, self-control, adaptability, autonomy, ability to express oneself, manage one's stress.
<b>Employability development</b>	Use of learned job search techniques	33	Edit your resume, go through interviews, search for information.
	Use of learned technical skills	6	Use the cash register, computer or cleaning products used during the course, communicate orally and in writing.
	Establishment of realistic career goals and a path to achieve them	15	Establish realistic career goals adapted to their abilities and training and know the path to achieve them.
	Obtaining employer-recognized work experience	11	Receive a certificate of employment and include this experience in your resume.
	Return to school	11	Decide to go back to school in order to develop employability.
<b>Integration into employment</b>	Employment stability	27	Work in the same job on an ongoing basis.
	Intention to keep employment	17	Wish to keep their job in the medium or long term.
	Job Match to Job Goals	17	The job held corresponds to life plans or professional goals.
	Job satisfaction	25	Be satisfied with his/her professional situation.
	Work climate	19	Perceive your workplace in a positive way.
	Working conditions	25	Remuneration and benefits are sufficient to support him and maintain his financial stability.

It should also be stressed that none of these four criteria appeared to be systematically more important than the others in the context of the study and that they should rather be considered as a whole leading to a marked improvement in the living situation of the individuals concerned. In this context, if there is a priority to be given, it should come from the starting situation of the participant concerned, since not all start from the same place.

The first criterion, the development of a normal and balanced lifestyle, highlights the importance of the social dimension in the process of professional integration, as some have already indicated [14], [26]-[29]. This is because several psychosocial problems that interns have to deal with when they arrive for an integration internship may hinder the rest of the process if they are not resolved. Indeed, how can we claim to become functional within the contemporary world of work while maintaining bad lifestyle habits or various toxic social situations? This first criterion, without having a direct link with employment, is therefore nevertheless necessary for integration to be a success since it largely determines the individual's ability to integrate and then keep a job in a sustainable way.

The second criterion is the development of personal and relational skills. It touches the sphere of personal growth and allows participants to live better in society and not only in the

context of work. It involves a change in attitude and the development of skills to better interact with others. Without these skills, seamless integration into the labour market would be greatly affected.

The third criterion involves employability, which corresponds more simply to the attractiveness that the individual can have for organizations looking for employees. Thus, through this criterion, it is the steps of the trainee to make himself more interesting in the eyes of employers that are scrutinized. This is about obtaining useful skills in employment, but also those that allow you to perform better during job search and selection processes. Overall, this third criterion is therefore essential because it largely determines whether the participant has a good chance of obtaining employment when his or her integration process is completed.

The fourth and final criterion ultimately involves the individual's ability to integrate into employment and thus to keep it. Naturally including the question of the intention to stay or leave one's job, this criterion nevertheless also covers how the individual feels about the experience of employment. It should be remembered that for young people who are far from the labour market, employment integration means holding a stable job for several years, a situation that will allow them to integrate other dimensions of their lives [17],

[25], [29]-[32]. However, holding a job is a situation that must be tamed and even appreciated to be truly sustainable and thus avoid a predictable dropout. By assessing this assessment of the employment situation and the intention to retain it, it becomes possible to better understand whether the integration process has made it possible to implement significant and lasting changes which are otherwise well in accordance, at least in part, with the pole of exteriority.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

By demonstrating the importance of the challenge of integration into employment, both for the individual concerned and for the society in which he evolves, the relevance of the integration company becomes obvious... provided, however, that it can be demonstrated that it is effective. However, to date, both the definitions and the evaluation processes applicable to these organizations and the results they produce are rare and widely criticized as insufficient to fully grasp the various components of the issue.

The interviews conducted as part of this study show the form that the benefits of the professional integration internships take for the participants, who on the whole end up with more ambitious life goals and more means to achieve them than when they started. The experiences as lived and shared by the participants in the study indicate that they become, through their internship, better equipped to succeed in employment, but also to integrate into society. It is these spin-offs, which cannot be adequately observed through measures and other traditional tools, that then define what the success of a socio-professional integration process really is.

When observed through the results of previous studies, the criteria are also confirmed. Indeed, these correspond to what can be found in the work of Alberio and Tremblay (2014a; 2014b), which emphasizes the dual objective of integration enterprises associated with participant support and profitability.

Overall, therefore, a new look is taken at the notion of success in the context of an integration course, which aims to better consider the important components of the progress made by participants. Thus, although this is a work to be completed, it is a first step towards a better understanding of what matters to the beneficiaries of these integration programs that can only facilitate the work of the stakeholders and the fair appreciation of these programs.

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