MENTOR CANADA

No Wrong Door

How Contextual Referral
Can Transform Digital
Service Navigation
for Youth in Canada

FALL 2020

Introduction

In early 2020, a group of stakeholders including MENTOR Canada, United Way Canada, Volunteer Canada, Ontario 211 Services, 211 Alberta, Tamarack Institute, Opportunity for All Youth, Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity, NPower, ESDC's Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS), Future Skills Centre, and Youth Digital Gateway (YDG) met to explore ideas about how independent digital systems could automatically present relevant opportunities and resources on each others' websites.

We considered how, when a youth initially lands on the wrong website in search of a needed support, they might be presented with referrals to relevant opportunities and resources on other websites. What emerged was the need to define a common framework for describing and exchanging those opportunities and resources, and how to define their connection to a website's visitors. That framework would have to consider existing classification systems, user taxonomies and metadata relevant to labour markets, educational programs and human facing services.

In November 2020, some of these stakeholders formed a working group to explore the development of a Contextual Opportunities and Resources Distribution System (CORDS) to improve youth awareness of, and access to, supports, resources and services in Canada.

A No Wrong Door Approach:
The Case for Contextual Opportunities and Resources Distribution System (CORDS)

Navigating the complex network of human facing services in Canada can be overwhelming for youth, particularly those facing barriers. This is equally problematic for the youth-serving organizations that support them. In a digital world, online search is increasingly replacing the warm introduction from one organization to another on behalf of the young person they are helping.

For youth seeking help, it is rare that they find what they need on the first website they visit. Their success depends on the algorithms of leading search engines and their ability to use the right keywords to leverage those search engines effectively. They may not have been exposed to the terminology that describes what they need, or may not even know exists, so they're limited to searching for what they know. Each additional step they have to take reduces their motivation to keep searching. The odds of failure increase if the path is made longer.

"One big problem is a lack of visibility. It took me days to find this [mentoring] program and it was almost hidden on some website."*

For youth-serving organizations, their ability to connect with these youth and other other youth serving organizations depends on their ability to be discovered online or through sector referral. They are equally reliant on search engines, and limited by those algorithms, digital literacy within their organization, and resources to market themselves through paid search and sector based referral sources.

This challenging journey is further exacerbated by the digital divide experienced by many youth in Canada. The digital divide is the uneven distribution in the access to information and communication technology, and is rooted in income inequality. It includes high costs of access, connectivity gaps and low digital literacy.**

Contextual Referral provides a solution to this challenge. Using a no-wrong door approach, it leverages technology to help young people find what they need, regardless of where they begin their search. The goal is to create a simple set of tools that any organization can implement to ensure the human facing services they provide are equally accessible or findable for all youth in Canada.

Limited Access to Devices and Internet Limit Youth Opportunities
According to Opportunities for All Youth, Canada runs the risk of having a hyper-connected core, and a disconnected periphery. For example, 62% of Canadians in the lowest income quartile are connected, versus 95% of those in the highest quartile. While broadband is available to 100% of urban Canadians, and 85% of rural Canadians, people living in remote areas have far lower levels of broadband access. In Nunavut, only 27% of Nunavut residents are connected.*

Vision

Through CORDS, our vision is to connect youth, community organizations, educational programs and labour market initiatives in Canada.

Contextual Opportunities and Resources Distribution System (CORDS) is a key piece of infrastructure for a "no wrong door" policy, weaving together opportunities and resources from different web-based sources for presentation to youth on the websites and web-based systems they use and presentation to the organizations that support them. It uses a data classification and resource exchange framework that will improve youth access to support resources.

Contextual referral is a part of everybody's everyday life. Every time a person searches a topic or an item online, they receive referrals to similar products. For example, an online book purchaser will receive recommendations for similar types of book (topic, author, etc) based on a purchase history. Similarly, a user of a streaming service would be directed to similar content based on viewing history. The goal of CORDS is to leverage this technology to help connect people with the human facing services they need.

When youth are searching online for employment, mentoring or social service resources, the contextual referral interface will identify and pull supplementary, alternate, additional resources that youth may not know existed and that might make the difference in establishing their path to success.
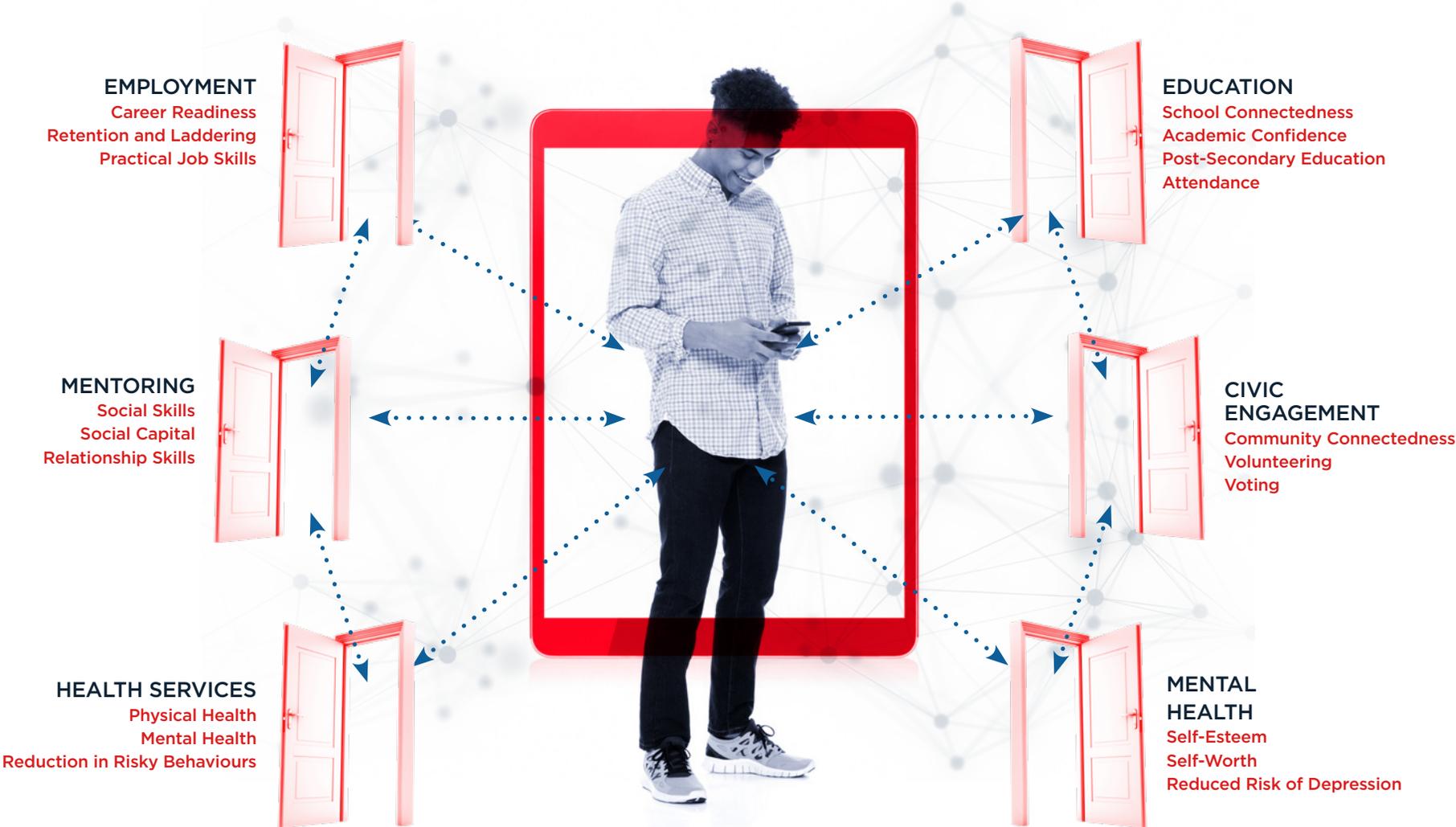
As an open knowledge project, CORDS would be a fundamental component in enabling community sector organizations to tap into a bigger, better pool of data, enhance their reach, and expand their online presence. Organizations with limited technical capacity will be able to implement the framework using a simple software development tool kit, including an API and digital plugs-ins that are compatible with multiple platforms and most programming languages (e.g. Drupal, WordPress, etc).

This project is consistent with the federal government's "open systems, open knowledge" objective as well as the "no wrong door" concepts it is striving to implement. It also helps address the challenge faced by youth experiencing the digital divide.

"I think there is a big need for a portal that people can access to find a mentor, because I feel it's very hard to find a mentor nowadays. So, I think it's important to have a system or like a central hub where like people can go to so that they can find their needs and stuff."[*]

NO WRONG DOOR

EMPLOYMENT
Career Readiness
Retention and Laddering
Practical Job Skills

EDUCATION
School Connectedness
Academic Confidence
Post-Secondary Education
Attendance

MENTORING
Social Skills
Social Capital
Relationship Skills

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Community Connectedness
Volunteering
Voting

HEALTH SERVICES
Physical Health
Mental Health
Reduction in Risky Behaviours

MENTAL HEALTH
Self-Esteem
Self-Worth
Reduced Risk of Depression

Benefits of CORDS

For Youth in Canada
• When youth are searching online for employment, mentoring or social service resources, the contextual referral interfaces identify and pull supplementary, alternate, additional resources that youth may not know existed and that might make the difference in establishing their path to success.

• For example, a youth may visit a website seeking a specific resource, but be directed to another resource which may better meet their needs. This is "no wrong door" in action.

For Community Organizations
• When an organization adopts the contextual referral interface, it can provide its web visitors with resources specific to that organization and refer them to resources from other service providers, government, educational institutions, sector organizations, that are relevant to what visitors are seeking.

• Individual organizations will have access to cross-sector, current without being responsible for maintaining and updating lists and accessing best practices from across the country.

• For example, a youth may visit their local community centre's website looking for help writing a resume and cover letter. if the youth lands on a page listing resume writing workshops that the community centre offers, with CORDS, they would also receive referrals to resume templates offered by a youth employment centre or to a virtual career mentoring program.

• Reducing duplication of efforts related to resource gathering and curation by organizing and centralizing open access to them.

• Providing an easy way to develop new metrics for project "success".

Appendix: Project Timelines and Terms of Reference

Join us as we work together to drive transformational change to connect youth, community organizations, educational programs and labour market initiatives in Canada.

Project Timelines

December
- Kick-off meeting with newly formed Project Team
- Hire consultant(s)
- Form Working Group

January
- Conduct Environmental scan of Opportunity Resource Taxonomy (ORT) and Visitor Taxonomy (VT) candidates
- Validate findings with youth representatives and community organizations identified by project team

February
- Technological and architectural options scan
- Final prototype of ORT and VT

March
- Working revisions of ORT and VT prototypes, and technological and architectural options.
- Final report submitted

Terms of Reference

We will be forming two different committees:

1. The Project Team will focus on the strategy behind the CORDS project. This team will meet bi-weekly for 90 minutes to start and then monthly once the scope of the project is understood.

2. The Working Group will focus on the tactical/technological side of the CORDS project. This group will meet bi-weekly for 90 minutes starting in January to support the consultants who will be driving the project forward

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