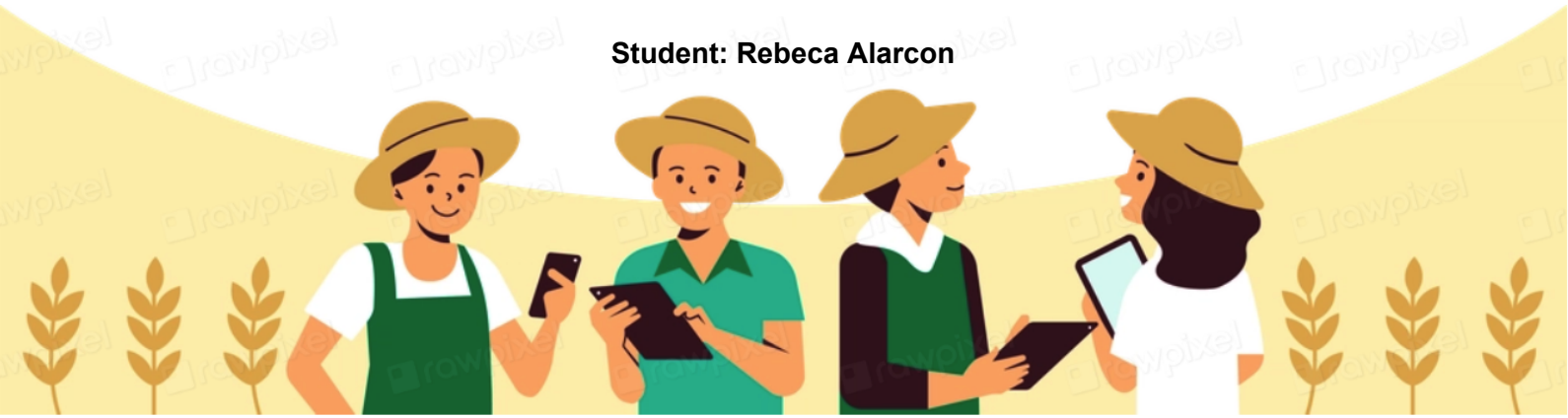


Leadership in Action Project: Digital Agriculture Program

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Introduction

This report describes my six-week Leadership-in-Action (LiA) initiative that I completed while working with Palette Skills. My research centered on analyzing recruiting decisions made by employers, their thoughts on Palette's Digital Agriculture Upskilling Program, and their perspectives on job placements in the field. All of this was done in an effort to increase the program's graduation rates for both non-immigrants and newcomers to Canada in terms of employment placement. As part of my work, I interviewed potential employers, created hypothetical candidate personalities, and developed a digital toolbox to get employer input on the hiring process. The project's relevance stems from its potential to close the skills gap between program graduates and employers, thereby promoting long-term employment and economic development in marginalized communities.

Developing Hypothetical Candidate Personas

Creating hypothetical candidate personas was a crucial part of the project, with the goal of representing participants in the Digital Agriculture program by capturing a variety of backgrounds and experiences. There were multiple steps in the process:

1. **Investigation and Gathering of Data:** The first stage was to compile data regarding the usual traits, experiences, and skill levels of participants in the Digital Agriculture initiative. This required looking at current toolkits for digital agriculture, reading up on employer viewpoints in the literature, and examining Palette Skills' own internal resources. I also reviewed the notes I had made during my first summer research project, which included the broad conclusions about the traits of typical participants. These materials included basic hiring data, previously conducted research on participant experiences, and interview forms previously utilized with companies.

Here is how I ended up dividing the personas on:

Graphic 1: Streams of Different Personas

Persona 1	Persona 2	Persona 3
Newcomers with Agriculture experience	Newcomers without Agriculture experience	Canadian without Agriculture experience

2. **Identifying Key Attributes:** Based on my research, I determined the most important qualities for employers. These included soft skills like communication and adaptability; personal backgrounds like being a newcomer to Canada or moving from another industry; and technical skills specific to agriculture (sales, product development, technicians), such as knowledge of crop management or data analysis.

In order to comprehend different employer prejudices and concerns, it was crucial to collect a varied range of experiences.

3. **Persona Profile Creation:** I created a series of initial hypothetical personas based on the information I had collected. With controlled characteristics for age, education, and work experience, each persona represented a distinct kind of candidate for digital agriculture. For example, one character could be a recent Nigerian immigrant with a master's degree in agricultural science but little work experience in Canada, while another could be a Mexican professional in the middle of their career who is moving from a non-agricultural sector. However, I kept factors like years of experience constant to ensure that I could evaluate employers accurately.
4. **Validation with Stakeholders:** After the first personas were written, they were examined and confirmed by Palette Skills's in-house subject matter experts and research specialists. The personas were improved based on input from these assessments to make sure they correctly reflected the kinds of applicants that companies could come across and take into consideration for positions in the digital agricultural industry.
5. **Creating Presentation Materials:** To help in conversations with employers, presentation materials were created using the final personas. This comprised summary documents and visual aids that listed the salient features of every persona, the reasoning for their development, and particular questions to direct employers' comments. Employers will find it easy to interact with and offer insightful feedback because these materials are clear and succinct.

Conducting Employer Interviews

Employers were surveyed using the established personas in the project's second phase to get their opinions on hiring practices and concerns. There were numerous crucial steps in this process:

1. **Setting Up Interviews:** One of the first obstacles was coordinating with employers. I made use of Palette Skills' current connections and network to make contact with possible candidates for interviews. A member of the Palette staff gave me a brief introduction, outlining the project's goals. Because many employers had limited availability, scheduling necessitated flexibility. Through showcasing the importance of their involvement in determining the direction of future workforce training, I managed to schedule interviews with four different employers.
2. **Interview Format:** Every interview was designed to make the most of the time allotted and obtain comprehensive information. I purposefully created a semi-structured interview format that accommodated both open-ended questions and directed inquiries. Following a brief overview of the project and the personas, the interview questions focused on getting the employers' opinions on each candidate profile.
3. **Introducing Personas to companies:** I gave each persona to the companies during the interview process and asked them to respond to the candidate's qualifications, experience, and background. Important questions centered on the aspects of each character that employers found appealing or unappealing, any reservations they may have about employing such applicants, and recommendations for how the Digital

Agriculture program could better equip participants for the workforce. This strategy allowed for an open and fruitful conversation, which allowed me to gather nuanced feedback.

4. **Gathering and Capturing Data:** In order to guarantee precision, I meticulously documented every interview, incorporating both numerical evaluations (like inclinations towards particular competencies) and qualitative discernments (like apprehensions regarding cultural compatibility or flexibility). I made recordings of the talks when I was allowed to so I could go back and review them later. This methodical approach made sure that all pertinent feedback was recorded so that it could be analyzed later.
5. **Analyzing Feedback:** Following the interviews, I went over all the information gathered to look for recurring themes and trends. In order to identify employer preferences, recurrent issues, and places where the Digital Agriculture program should be strengthened, I examined the feedback. The project's deliverables, such as the tools for continuing employer feedback and suggestions for program modifications, were based on this analysis.
6. **Adapting to Challenges:** Owing to employer time constraints, several interviews ended earlier than expected. In these situations, I made sure that even the shortest conversations were targeted and relevant by giving priority to the most important queries. Despite my time constraints, this flexibility allowed me to obtain insightful information.

Conclusion and Introspection: Personas and Interviews

Employers' expectations and impressions were better understood thanks to the process of developing personas and conducting interviews. The personas enabled an organized yet adaptable interview process and were a useful tool for getting candid feedback. This experience made clear how important it is to prepare thoughtful questions and materials, but it also made clear how important it is to be flexible and have good communication skills when interacting with stakeholders. The input received as a result of these initiatives will be used to improve the Digital Agriculture program, bringing it closer to industry standards and better serving the professional goals of marginalized people.

Leadership Techniques Used and Developed

Good communication was essential to the success of this endeavor. It was crucial to make sure employers and internal Palette staff understood the aims and purposes of the employer feedback sessions. I made sure that employers understood the significance of their participation in the project, clearly stated its objective, and provided an explanation of how the feedback would be used. I achieved this by using effective verbal and writing communication skills. This ability was especially crucial for organizing interview times and teaching employers about the hypothetical candidate personalities, guaranteeing that the conversations were targeted and purpose-driven.

It was always necessary to solve problems, particularly when faced with obstacles like limited interview time and schedule difficulties with busy companies. I used critical thinking to rank the importance of the questions, reorganize the interviews to make the most of the time

allotted, and come up with original ideas for getting insightful input, including changing the format of the questions or cutting down on the length of the interview as needed. Strong cooperation and collaboration skills were required in order to work closely with Palette Skills, internal stakeholders, and employers. It was crucial to have frequent check-ins, open lines of communication, and work together to create and improve the feedback tool and personas. I collaborated with team members to get feedback, confirm results, and make sure everyone understood the project's goals.

Cultural Humility

Throughout the project, cultural humility was a crucial leadership trait used, especially when interacting with employers from various industries and backgrounds. Trust-building and encouraging honest, open feedback required an understanding of and respect for many cultural viewpoints.

- **Challenging Cultural Biases:** I deliberately tried to identify and confront my own cultural prejudices, making sure that I went into every interview with an open mind and a sincere desire to learn about their particular viewpoints. This required carefully collecting input from a variety of companies while keeping in mind any cultural factors that might have an impact on their opinions on workforce development and hiring.
- **Engaging with Diverse Perspectives:** I valued employers' opinion regardless of whether it confirmed my presumptions in the beginning and encouraged them to offer their thoughts freely as a sign of respect. This strategy promoted a more inclusive conversation, which made it possible for me to compile a wider range of input that was representative of the many demands of the sector.
- **Showing Empathy and Active Listening:** During one specific interview, a manager voiced worries over the cultural assimilation of recent hires into their team, which is primarily composed of Canadians. I showed empathy by being aware of the difficulties they were facing and paying attention to what they had to say. Inquiring further to gain a deeper understanding of their viewpoint, I demonstrated self-awareness by considering the ways in which my own cultural upbringing shaped my opinions. This conversation confirmed my commitment to inclusive and compassionate leadership by highlighting the significance of paying attention and showing respect in cross-cultural interactions.

Ethical Considerations

1. Data Confidentiality and Privacy

Ensuring the confidentiality of employer input constituted a crucial ethical consideration for this research. Employers were offering candid and occasionally revealing observations, therefore it was crucial to preserve their confidence by protecting their answers. In order to address this, I made all comments anonymous in reports and analysis and made sure to make the confidentiality policy explicit at the outset of every interview.

- **Learning from Ethical Leadership:** I learned from this experience how important it is to handle sensitive material with honesty and transparency. It reaffirmed the necessity of establishing and upholding moral principles, which are essential for promoting candor and trust. I discovered that building a secure atmosphere where stakeholders feel appreciated and respected is the foundation of ethical leadership.

2. Honoring the Time and Contribution of Employers

Respecting the time and effort employers engaged in giving feedback was another ethical consideration. I tried to conduct focused and fast interviews, keeping in mind their hectic schedules, to make sure the process was as easy and beneficial as feasible for them. I gave them comments on how their ideas would be applied to enhance the Digital Agriculture initiative and thanked them for their involvement.

- **Learning from Ethical Leadership:** This method placed a strong emphasis on the reciprocity and respect that are essential to ethical leadership. I showed my dedication to moral behavior by appreciating and recognizing the efforts of my employers, which helped to build strong bonds and a feeling of common purpose.

Project Goals and SMART Targets

As previously indicated, this project's goal was to learn about employers' perceptions of typical applicants for Digital Agriculture, with a particular emphasis on the dangers, difficulties, and unanswered questions that companies may have regarding recruiting such people. To do this, I have three SMART objectives:

- **Construct Hypothetical Candidate Personas:** By the end of Week 3, formulate a series of hypothetical candidate personas that draw upon internal resources and research. This objective was clear, quantifiable based on the development of personas, doable with the resources at hand, pertinent to comprehending employer viewpoints, and time-bound, within the first three weeks of the project.
- **Interviews with Employers:** Arrange and carry out interviews with a minimum of five employers, introducing the candidate personalities and getting their feedback. This objective was clear, quantifiable in terms of the number of interviews conducted, reachable through Palette's network, pertinent to obtaining the required data, and time-bound in relation to the project schedule.
- **Create an Employer Feedback toolbox:** By Weeks 5 and 6, Palette Skills should have a digital toolbox that will enable employers to provide continuous feedback regarding the hiring process. I was able to create this toolbox as well as a separate document that outlined typical company worries regarding program participants' upskilling. This aim was time-bound within the project's timeframe, relevant to increasing job placement rates, specific, measurable by the toolkit's completion, and doable with the feedback obtained.

Collaborating with a Community

The Digital Agriculture program is mainly intended for marginalized populations, such as recent immigrants to Canada and people making a shift from non-agricultural fields. This

study attempted to solve the difficulties these people had finding work by concentrating on employer viewpoints, which will promote equitable economic growth and long-term job prospects.

The project entailed creating personas that reflected common candidates for Digital Agriculture, including recent immigrants from nations like China, Mexico, Nigeria, and India who had no prior agricultural expertise. This strategy sought to draw attention to the particular difficulties these people have, including apparent skill mismatches, cultural differences, and prejudice from prospective employers. With this approach, the project aimed to better connect the curriculum with industry demands, ultimately assisting marginalized people in their job searches.

Perspectives Gained in a New Environment

Working closely with Palette Skills and employers while fully immersed in the Digital Agriculture space gave me valuable insights into the intricacies of company decision-making procedures. The experience made clear how important it is to comprehend other points of view, since businesses voiced a variety of worries about candidates—from their capacity to adjust to the job to the particular technical skills needed.

A thorough examination of the difficulties encountered by marginalized communities, including structural prejudices and the requirement for focused assistance in bridging skill and cultural gaps, was also provided by this initiative. It emphasized how important customized upskilling programs can be for improving employability and promoting economic inclusion. I was forced by the experience to consider program design, employer involvement, and the significance of ongoing feedback loops in order to make sure that training initiatives are in line with industry demands.

Project Impact and Sustainability

The project's influence is gauged by how well it helps graduates of the Digital Agriculture program land jobs. Palette Skills can adjust and improve their programs in response to employer needs and concerns thanks to the created toolbox and employer feedback methods. Through improved alignment of training outcomes with labor market demands, the project helps program participants get long-term employment.

Several key performance indicators (KPIs) will be used to measure sustainability, including:

- **Employer Engagement:** Monitoring how many employers use the toolkit and actively participate in feedback sessions.
- **Job Placement Rates:** Tracking program graduates' employment outcomes both before and after the toolkit is put into use.
- **Program Modifications:** Assessing modifications made to the Digital Agriculture program in light of employer input to guarantee ongoing enhancement.

These measures will be used to evaluate the project's long-term efficacy in improving marginalized groups' employability and fostering sustainable economic growth.

Conclusion

The Leadership-in-Action initiative offered a priceless chance to put leadership abilities to use in a practical setting while supporting a cause that is consistent with both professional and personal values. Through employer engagement and addressing the issues that Digital Agriculture graduates encounter, this initiative helped to create an upskilling program that is more inclusive and adaptable. In order to meet the demands of companies and job seekers, Palette Skills will continue to benefit from the insights acquired and tools produced during this initiative.

My grasp of leadership, empathy, and the usefulness of other viewpoints in problem-solving has all improved as a result of this experience. It has also strengthened my resolve to work with marginalized areas to bring about significant and long-lasting change. The knowledge and abilities obtained from this project will be extremely helpful in the future when pursuing leadership and social impact projects.