

A day in the life of Le Boulot vers ...

BY ANNE-MARIE MOTTET

A pioneer among Québec's social and professional integration businesses (*entreprises d'insertion*), Le Boulot vers ... has been helping troubled young people connect with the labour market since 1983. In addition to the thousands of people it has equipped with skills in furniture-making, Boulot vers has taken a lead role in the evaluation of outcomes in this sector as part of a sustained (and successful) effort to secure respect and financial assistance from the federal and provincial governments. Here, in an excerpt from her recent history of the business, *Le Boulot vers ... 20 ans à meubler des vies*, Anne-Marie Mottet offers a snapshot of the Boulot vers method, in the form of a "guided tour" of one orientation session.

A Thursday in May 2003, 8:30 am

"Hello, and welcome to Boulot vers. I'm the Executive Director and it's a pleasure to meet you. Please take a moment and introduce yourselves." That's how every orientation for would-be participants of the Boulot vers internship program begins.

Today it's Jenny, Jonathan, Luc, Marc, Martin, Oscar, and Suzanne. Young people 18 to 25 years in age and unemployed. Two of them are from Montréal's Hochelaga-Maisonneuve district and one from Anjou. The others are from the Laurentians, the Gaspé, Saguenay, and Montérégie. One immigrated to Québec with his family at the age of nine. Some have lived for years on the streets, others have gone from one job to another since they left school, usually in grades 8 or 9. Some have had dealings with the justice system. Some have had drug problems.

Several were directed to the organization by acquaintances or by former Boulot vers interns; others by an Emploi Québec agent, by someone working at one of the youth organizations, or even by an ad they saw in a newspaper. Their expectations vary. There are those who are after professional qualifications or a letter of reference. Others still, perhaps more familiar with the objectives of an *entreprise d'insertion*, express such individual goals as accepting authority or keeping a job long-term.

What they all have in common is the change they have jump-started in their lives by applying for an internship at Boulot vers.

In the eyes of the Executive Director, "the quality of that first contact with the client is essential. From the moment youth arrive at Boulot vers, from the first phone call, you have to listen to their

"The youth that we help have all kinds of problems. Often they don't even know that they are asking for something. The effort to call, or simply to sign up for the information session can be enormous. So the internship itself is a real mountain."

needs. The youth that we help have all kinds of problems and don't know how to ask questions. Often they don't even know that they are asking for something. Making the effort to call, or simply to sign up for the information session can be enormous for them. So the internship itself is a real mountain." This is why it's important for her to greet them personally at the orientation.

After a half hour of introductions, she once again welcomes everyone and affirms that the organization is right for them. "Boulot vers personnel are very competent and love working with youth. If you want help, we'll be there. Any questions?"

Hands go up all around the table. "When do we start?" "Do we need work boots?" "Do we get paid for technical training?" "When will we find out if we're working days or evenings?" She reassures them, and reminds them that the orientation is there to answer all these questions and that all the staff they meet today and tomorrow will do just that.

(above) Boulot vers intern Jennifer Sweeney applies the finishing touches to a piece of office furniture. Photo: Jacques Lavallée.

The orientation is one of the steps for selecting future program participants. It lasts about 10 hours, over two days, and provides all the information necessary to begin an internship. Intervention staff, the Production Manager and her assistant, as well as the Executive Director and her assistant meet the young people, explain their roles, and present the workshop regulations. They talk about the training they will receive, about their payment schedule, and about the ABCs of health and safety in the workshop. A brief tour of the plant, psychosocial support, the job search – everything is covered.

“Whatever I tell them during the orientation,” explains the Production and Sales Manager, “they have already forgotten when they enter the workshop. Sometimes it’s because it’s been too long since they sat down in a chair to listen to instructions or rules.” Their attention span is also reduced because they are hungry or have drug problems, or simply because they’re not used to being up at 8:30 am. That’s what the orientation is about: getting them ready to come to work in ten days. “So it’s not so hard a climb,” as Michel Gendron said, when he came up with the idea for this step in the process.

9:00 am

The Employment Counsellor speaks next. “You’ve got guts. It really took something to be here this morning. You’ve earned your place in the program. Would you introduce yourselves so I can learn your names?”

After a go around the table, she continues. “I’m your orientation counsellor. I’m here so that there’s some continuity after your internship – to help you discover what we call the ‘predictors

of success’: your strengths, your weaknesses, your talents, what excites you. You have all known success. Together we have to find out when and how. You have all experienced failure. We must understand why.”

She explains that the two last weeks of the internship are given over to the job search. They will get paid during this time even though they won’t be in the workshop.

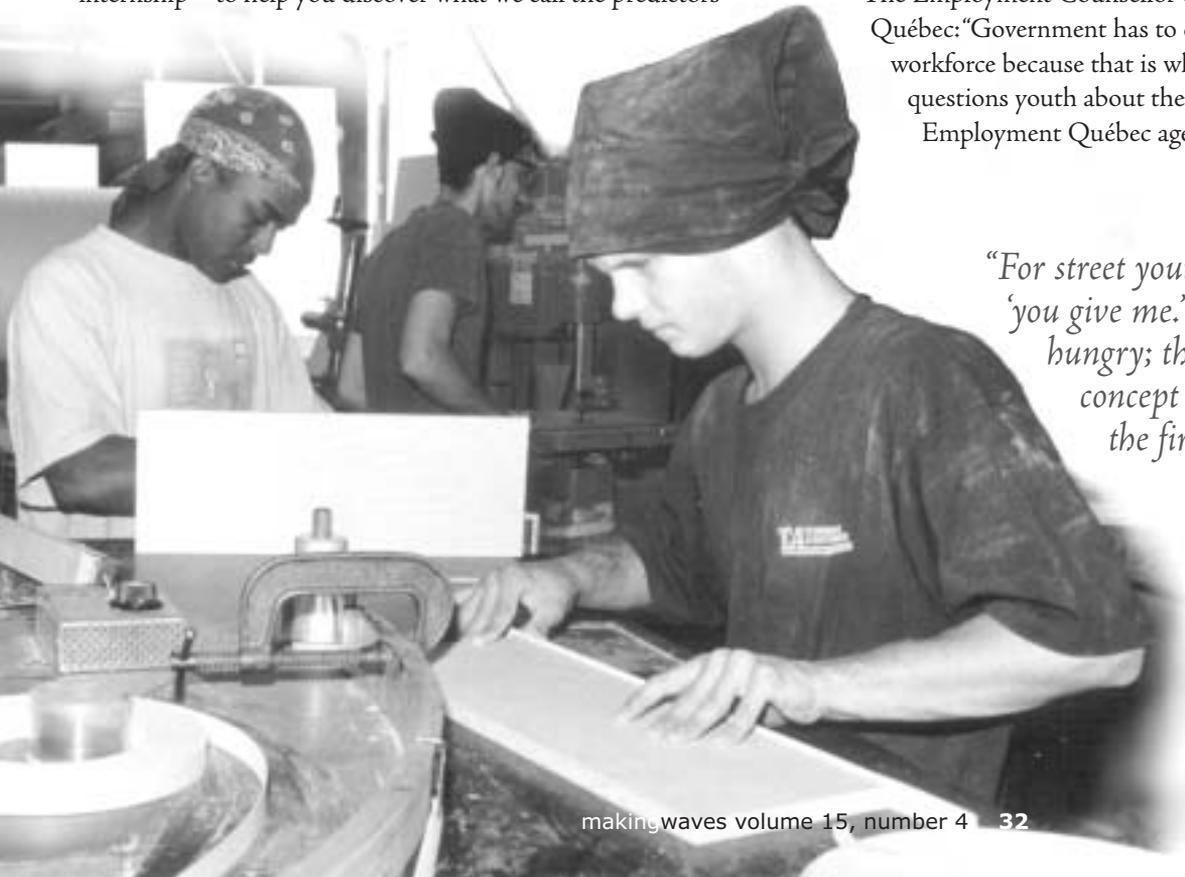
A youth asks her if it really will be possible to find a job in two weeks. “Most land a job before the end of their 2-week job search,” she replies. “Salaries are pretty good, but you have to earn them. You’re in a sector – woodworking – where there’s a shortage of workers. There’s about 2,800 furniture manufacturing businesses in Québec, 20% of them in Montreal (Anjou, Saint-Léonard, and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve) and 20% in Montérégie.” Some groan. “Montérégie isn’t all that far,” she counters. “You have to take work where you find it.”

She questions the women about their interest in woodworking and handling tools. There are jobs in furniture manufacturing for them too, she says, even though they will have to assert themselves and carve out their own niche. The good news is that women get priority in vocational training schools.

Returning to school is another option after *Boulot vers*. “Employment Insurance pays a generous allowance to young people who want to return to school to learn a vocation,” she explains. “This allowance can be applied to one year to complete an academic program and two years for learning a trade. To be eligible for admission, however, you require a plan of action (and the blessing of *Emploi Québec*.)”

The Employment Counsellor explains the mandate of *Emploi Québec*: “Government has to develop the skills of the workforce because that is where a country’s riches lie.” She questions youth about their relationships with their *Emploi Québec* agents. A question comes up: “Can

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(from left) Yeissy Lopez and Antony Ruel use the edge bander in the workshop. Photo: Jacques Lavallée.

an agent stop me from doing the internship?” Her response is immediate: “If there were objections, the Intervention Manager would have already identified them during the individual interviews.”

Sometimes agents less familiar with *entreprises d’insertion* refuse an internship to a youth. Then the Executive Director or Intervention Manager takes the file to the Mercier/Hochelaga-Maisonneuve community employment centre. In most cases, a bit more information from a staff member is enough get the application accepted. The 10-day layover between the orientation and the start of the program proper enables administrative formalities like these to be resolved.

The Employment Counsellor finishes her presentation by inviting the young people to participate in RDO, the opportunity research program. Employees in each shift nominate three representatives. These “employee committees” meet regularly and on the basis of interns’ suggestions make recommendations for improving the working conditions. It could concern the purchase of a new tool with better safety features, for example, or something that would make the cafeteria more comfortable. The committee meets with the employer and negotiates the matter. “Participating in this committee prepares you for work. You can learn how to negotiate without ‘blowing your stack,’ and at the same time make life better for interns and for Boulot vers!”

10:00 am

The Production and Sales Manager is the best person to explain the way the business runs. She follows the Employment Counsellor.

“You’re looking at the boss of the workshop,” she explains to the young people. “I’m not laid back. I’m demanding – but that’s what being a boss is all about. And the ones you get elsewhere in this sector will often be worse than me, because I respect young people. With me, it’s give-give. If you give me nothing – if you’re late or fool around in the workshop – you will find me less than sympathetic. But I will tell you why instead of just firing you. I will also tell you what you have to do to change the situation. If you take that opportunity, I may well become an accomplice to your success in the workshop.”

Another staff member explains how interns understand the concept of exchange: “For street youth, ‘help’ is something you give me.’ That’s what they’re used to. They go to Pops; they’re hungry; they’re given food. From that experience they conclude that helping them is giving them things. The concept of *exchange*, that’s one of the first things they learn here.”

Each young person receives a copy of the regulations. In 15 points, this document outlines working conditions, evaluation systems, recognition of achievement, and disciplinary measures.

The work contract is one of the first regulations explained. Binding the intern and the organization, the contract specifies the length of the internship (which may vary from 17 to 26 weeks,

depending on the objectives to be achieved) and the dates of three performance evaluations carried out jointly by the Production and Intervention teams. It also stipulates that at the end of the internship the young person must write a report that includes a summary of the objectives attained and an action plan for the future. This contract is usually signed, one month after hiring, by the intern, the Intervention Manager, and the Production Manager.

“Sometimes I don’t sign a young person’s contract,” says the Production Manager. “After four weeks of observation, I can easily see if they’re ready or not.” A young person must be convinced that they want change their life, and that the efforts they make to change it bring more benefits than the life they led before.



She also outlines a system for recognizing and rewarding interns’ efforts. A training diploma, presented to each young person at the end of the internship, may contain attestations as to punctuality and quality of participation. In order to underline the workshop’s obligation to produce good quality furniture and the care that the employee brings to their work, a bonus of \$40 or \$75 is made to interns who receive a “good” or “very good” grade in work evaluations. Finally, students who were not late or absent during the entire month receive a Certificate of Punctuality. Three certificates get you a 1-day paid holiday.

In addition to these formal rules regarding rewards, the manager goes on, “there are small successes that we like young people to experience. For example, when the Intervention Team notices that someone is really trying to attain their production and personal objectives, when we see that they are questioning themselves, that they are making progress, we can offer the challenge of becoming a team leader.”

“The team leader,” explains one workshop manager, “can replace us when we have to leave for a few minutes. He or she can also have certain responsibilities such as taking care of the tools. Sometimes people take it too seriously and start playing boss. You then have to talk to them and make them understand that

(above) Myra Sylvestre-Langlois et Marie-Hélène Roy put the panel saw to work. Photo: Le Boulot vers ...

"You are with us for six months. For six months, you'll have a stable job & a salary to meet your needs. We want you to benefit from it by setting objectives that will improve your quality of life. Our goal, in a way, is to teach you how to learn – to teach you that you can change."



they are there to help and not give orders. But it's important that such a discussion happen in private, not in front of everybody. Young people won't take such disrespect."

Fanny set her sights on becoming a team leader during the first meeting with the Intervention Manager. With her leadership capability and her woodworking skills, she became leader before even signing her contract. "I was highly motivated. It was easy. Except when a new group came to the workshop. They're younger, so it changed the dynamics. It's one thing to help others with their work. It's another thing to have to tell them to work. Some were against me being a team leader. I confronted them and didn't lose any sleep over it!" That's a significant point, seeing as another one of Fanny's objectives was to learn to relax and manage stress.

Much of the 1 1/2-hour meeting with the Production and Sales Manager was about negative behaviours and their consequences. You have to be clear that being late, even if it's for only five minutes, is still being late. "What if the metro breaks down?" asks someone. The reply is quick: "You have to learn not to underestimate your travel time. Leave yourself some room to manoeuvre to keep from being late. We will understand if there's a

breakdown, obviously, but then it would be a good idea to call from the metro and warn us that you'll be late."

Define the rule, the reason for it, show ways to abide by it, develop the reflexes of self-respect, respect for others, for authority, and for your surroundings – that is the process followed in this presentation. If a rule is broken, the consequences are clear. Whether it is a verbal warning or a suspension, everything is explained in detail and illustrated with real-life examples from the workshop and from industry. The ultimate punishment is the termination of the internship and redirection of the young person to somewhere better adapted to their needs.

The Production Manager concludes her presentation by announcing that, for security reasons, no jewellery is allowed in the workshop. No problem. But when she mentions that this rule includes all piercing, internal or external, groans are heard. This ban, which directly affects the image young people have of themselves, is a real aggravation (as their discussion during the break makes abundantly clear).

11:30 am

The Intervention Manager takes over for a few minutes. This is not her first meeting with the new cohort. She saw them last Friday afternoon at an information session attended by 17 of the 26 young people who pre-registered.

A half hour long, this meeting explains what *Boulot vers* is all about and the selection process for admission to the program. The selection process allows staff to measure "the subjective criterion for admission: the criterion of desire," as the Executive Director explains:

(above) Furniture for *Ma Chambre*, an organization active in the mental health housing sector. (inset) Finishing a cabinet. Photos: *Le Boulot vers* ...

“The desire to play a role in society, as a citizen and on the job market. When a young person calls and registers for an information session and arrives on time. When they call on Monday morning for the group interview and also arrive on time. When they make an appointment for a one-on-one interview and show up for it. When they come to the internship orientation even though it’s unpaid. We measure this person’s desire, ten times, not just once. And if someone trips up in the expression of their desire, we say, ‘It’s okay! Next time around you’ll have already completed the group interview. So you didn’t make your one-on-one interview – it’s okay, that’s where you’re at! The next interviews will be in three weeks. Call us then!’”

The Intervention Manager has thus met the students during the information session as well as the group and one-on-one interviews. The number of participants fell from 17 to 9 for the group interview. At this point the eligibility of each candidate, verified after the first telephone contact, is re-evaluated. The Intervention and Production Managers conduct the interview and question the young people about their motivation for employment and about their individual objectives. “We try to ask questions that aren’t too personal,” explains the Production Manager, “because there can be 5, 10, or 15 young people in the room. It’s a matter of respect.”

More personal questions were touched upon during the hour-long one-on-one interview. Each candidate for the program had to complete an employment application form that was submitted at the information session. From this questionnaire, the Intervention Manager has all information she needs to complete a profile of the young person and determine if the organization can address their needs. If it cannot, the candidate is directed to other organizations better equipped to help them. It is during this meeting that the young person learns if they are accepted and determines their program objectives. They are then asked to show up for the orientation.

11:45 am

After making sure the candidates have submitted all the documentation necessary for admission – birth certificate, health insurance number, social security number – the Intervention Manager gives the floor to the Administrative Assistant.

“Like any employer,” she explains while distributing another form, “we need your address, your phone number, etc. Under ‘emergency contact,’ it’s important that you specify someone with whom you have a stable relationship. If we lose touch with you, we will contact this person during our 2-year follow-up.”

Employees are paid every week and salaries are direct-deposited. This way, young people don’t get ripped off by check-cashers. It’s just one more step for those with no bank account or an inactive one.

Noon

Finally, it’s time for the training representative from the school board to meet the students. “This program should enable you to acquire professional and personal skills. I will evaluate both while observing you at work. Of the 40 hours per week you spend here, 30 are eligible for evaluation by the school board as training. You require 300 hours of training to get your certificate. That’s why I have to take attendance. But there won’t be an exam!”

“I wander around the workshop, I look at the way you work, if you are wearing your glasses, your safety boots, how you behave with other members of your team. I can show you a technique, but the workshop managers will be the ones to teach you how to use the tools.”

It’s 12:30. At last, the first day of the orientation is over. A bit overwhelmed by all the information, the young people hurry to get out.

Friday, 8:30 am

Cups of coffee firmly in hand, the youth start their second day. The Production Assistant is the first staff member to meet with them. He hands them out the “Health and Safety Rules” which he then takes the time to read aloud and justify, point by point.

“Machines have no feelings. Always keep this in mind, for your own benefit and for that of others.” Using examples of accidents that occurred in the workshop or from his own woodworking experience, he reminds his listeners again and again to stay focussed on their work while remaining aware of their surroundings and their co-workers.

If the story of the fingertips neatly polished by the sander makes everyone smile, the one about the finger sawn off when one employee distracted another gives people pause. “Never speak to someone working at a machine,” he explains. “You always have to know what you are doing. A moment’s distraction may cause an accident. Wait for the person to finish before talking to them.” He will repeat this rule several times before presentation is over.

The Production Assistant also reminds them of the importance of a clean workplace and well-maintained tools. Tools are to be used only after you receive the proper training. “There are many ways to use a saw, but only one right way, and that’s the one we’ll teach you,” he continues. “Between us, the workshop staff have almost 100 years of experience. We will share this experience with you and show you the right way to do things, so you’ll be safe and so the work will be done properly.”

Thus, in one hour he provides an overview of the issues of work safety and respect for authority. He also touches on the quality of products manufactured in the workshop. “When I deliver furniture to clients, I will bring one of you with me to help me unload and install it. It’s nice to receive compliments from satisfied clients. It is definitely not nice when furniture is damaged or isn’t what they

ordered. I don't find it funny, nor does the employer. We've wasted time and materials. We have better things to do than to start all over on something we have already done. So if you are not certain about how to do the job right, stop and ask for help!"

He then takes the young people on a tour of the workshop. About 20 interns are at work, under the direction of a workshop manager and team leaders. They cut, assemble, nail, glue, and sand pieces of wood that will become beds, cabinets, bedside tables, and dressers to complete orders from such clients as Mobilia, the Rivière-des-Prairies Hospital, or the Salvation Army. Some of the workers are busy assembling two pine dressers to serve as door prizes at the upcoming fundraising concert which is hoped to gross \$225,000.

As he shows the group the various tools and machines they will be learning to use, from the table saw and sanders, to the drills, edge banders, and forklift, the Production Assistant estimates their value at over \$150,000 – a prime opportunity to underline the importance of good tool maintenance. The Production and Sales Manager comes over for a few minutes to show them around the finishing room, which recently has been totally refurbished. Of this she is particularly proud because it allows the workshop to keep work that was sent to sub-contractors and provides additional experience for the interns.

Back in the meeting room, the Production Assistant signs off with a preview of the interns' first day on the job. In teams of two, with the assistance of a trained intern, they will learn to use hand tools and make a start on building furniture.

10:00 am

After a break, the students come back to meet the psychosocial co-ordinator. First off, she says, she is not a psychologist. Her role is not to put them through therapy but to keep them company during the internship and, if need be, afterwards.

"I'm handing out a questionnaire that I use to assess your quality of life," she explains. "For example, I want to know what successes you've experienced, how you size up your financial situation, your health and level of fatigue, and your living habits. Your answers will help me to complete a profile of each of you. You are with us for six months. For six months, you'll have a stable job and a salary to meet your needs. We want you to benefit from it by setting objectives that will improve your quality of life. Our goal, in a way, is to teach you how to learn – to teach you that you can change." For an hour and a half the young people are called upon to reflect on their lives. "You are asking some pretty personal questions," says one, when asked to rate his past, present, and future life on a scale of 1 to 20.

The co-ordinator explains to the young people that she will see them in group sessions concerning communication, pleasure, and dependency. She will also meet with them

individually, if the need arises. Such a need may come right from an intern who wants to discuss certain problems, or it may come from staff members who have a concern they want addressed.

Many extracurricular learning opportunities are made available. Two hours a week are dedicated to such topics as first aid, the structure of Boulot vers, social rights (housing, unionization, consumer rights), visits to other businesses, and other ways to integrate life and work. Many of these training sessions are led by other community members. For example, the local financial planning co-operative ACEF presents a course on budgeting, and a representative of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve Local Community Service Centre discusses issues in nutrition or sexuality with the young people.

After a break, one last presentation: a teacher of mathematics and basic French. During the orientation, many young people said they had trouble reading a tape measure because they didn't understand fractions. Others said they would like to learn how to read plans. To facilitate the acquisition of these skills, Boulot vers entered into a partnership with the Pointe-de-l'Île school board. For half a day each week, it sends over a teacher to offer instruction in some of the fundamentals. The young people write an exam to determine the help they need. An appointment is scheduled in ten days time for the start of their internship.

A few hours later

It being the last Friday of the month, the entire staff and interns from both shifts invade the room. It's time to go over the events of the month. To the applause of their co-workers, about ten interns receive Certificates of Punctuality for not being late once during the past four weeks.

And it's with great pleasure that the Executive Director awards diplomas to Isabelle and Jacinthe, two young women who have just finished their internship. A card signed by all wishes them all the best. Their next project: they and six other graduates will help renovate a chateau that is to serve as a training site for young woodworkers and horticulturists in France. To cries of "Have a great trip!" "Come back and see us some time!" and "Keep in touch!" the two girls go out the door of the workshop where they turned their lives around. 

A writer by profession since the 1980s, ANNE-MARIE MOTTET has been involved with community-based organizations for many years. Her book, *Le Boulot vers... 20 ans à meubler des vies* (Éditions du Boréal, Montréal, QC, ISBN 2-7646-0255-3, 221 pp.) can be purchased through your local bookstore, or by contacting Le Boulot vers ... at 4447, de Rouen, Montréal, QC H1V 1H1 (tel)514-259-2312, (e-mail) nancy.briere@bellnet.ca. English language translation: Stefan Ochman. To learn more about Le Boulot vers, go to www.boulotvers.org.