



Social and Emotional Skills Are Top of Mind Across Canada

When we asked people across Canada to identify the most important skills for career success, they overwhelmingly identified social and emotional skills (SES), like communication, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills, along with leadership and adaptability.

On behalf of the Future Skills Centre, The Conference Board of Canada held regional roundtable discussions between October 2019 and March 2020. We did this to better understand how skills challenges vary across regions and to identify ways to respond. We met with educators, community organizers, employers, students, and other skills stakeholders in nearly every province and territory.¹

In 35 of 50 roundtables (70 per cent), participants singled out SES when they discussed pressing skills demands and challenges. Four clear themes emerged:

- concern that the next generation lacks SES
- a need for inclusive approaches to SES development
- growing demand from employers for SES
- ideas on how to better develop SES

Kids these days: Concerns about the next generation

Participants expressed concern that young people struggle to develop SES. We heard, for example, concerns that youth transitioning into the workplace lack professionalism, interpersonal abilities, and work ethic. Some went further, expressing concerns that young people may struggle to think critically and creatively.

Why did participants feel this way? Explanations varied. Some felt that younger workers' dependence on technology inhibited their interpersonal and communication skills development. Others argued that education models are

outdated and fail to prepare students for real-world environments. One person concluded that "it is the prerogative of every generation to say the next generation is not living up to the standards they did. Do we have evidence that work ethic is declining? I have not seen any."

In other words, not everyone agreed. Many participants recognized that despite some hiccups in SES development, young people are innately resilient, having lived through significant political and economic events while continuously adapting to technological change.

Inclusivity is vital

Everywhere we visited, participants expressed frustration about the barriers those in rural and remote regions, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, newcomers, and other vulnerable groups face in accessing education and training opportunities. Ideas and suggestions to improve SES development came with the caveat that marginalized individuals must be central in the solutions we develop, or else we risk exacerbating existing inequalities.

We were also cautioned not to advance a western, Eurocentric perspective on the skills that individuals ought to have. Some cultures value and demonstrate different skills in different ways. And if "SES" just becomes a codeword for the skill sets that favour privileged populations, that will widen the gap, not close it.

Skills articulation can also be a challenge, where a person has relevant skills and experiences but fails to communicate them to employers. In one example, a community worker recalled an Inuk candidate who had organized and led hunting trips, but who did not recognize or articulate that their experience demonstrated in-demand skills—like leadership, communication, and problem-solving—when presenting themselves to employers.

On the other hand, the cultural competence of employers and educators was highlighted as increasingly essential in establishing inclusive and safe places for individuals to work and learn.



¹ Note: Events in British Columbia and Quebec were postponed due to COVID-19.

Growing demand for SES

Participants were clear that technical skills and knowledge remain important, but they were also in agreement that SES are essential to career success across a range of workplaces. Despite increasing digitization and tech adoption, one participant concluded that “you can’t automate compassion, organizational skills, communication. Those skills are increasingly important as we move towards a more digital economy.”

Where do we go from here?

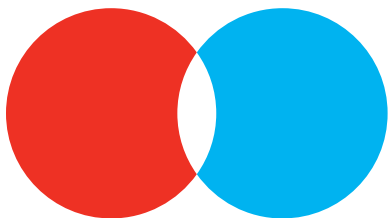
Ideas for SES development centred on students and workplaces:

- **Curriculum change**
We need to re-conceptualize post-secondary teaching and training to place more emphasis on SES development.
- **Experiential learning**
Experiential learning opportunities and mentorship help students strengthen their SES. So does volunteering.
- **Lifelong learning**
Educational systems, employers, learners, and workers need to recognize and take responsibility for the fact that SES develop over a lifetime.
- **New approaches to credentials**
Credentials are important but incomplete indicators of a person’s skills. We need to find new ways to measure and assess SES and provide tools that employers can actually use.
- **Prior learning recognition**
Institutions and employers must do a better job of recognizing lived experience and prior learning, even in the absence of credentials. This is especially true for newcomers and Indigenous job-seekers, whose experience may not be perceived as comparable to standard credentials.

Explore more

The Conference Board of Canada will draw on the lessons from the regional roundtables and our ongoing research to create new tools, data, and resources that support SES development and lifelong learning across regions and diverse populations.

To learn more, keep an eye on our webpage: <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/focus-areas/education-skills>.



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