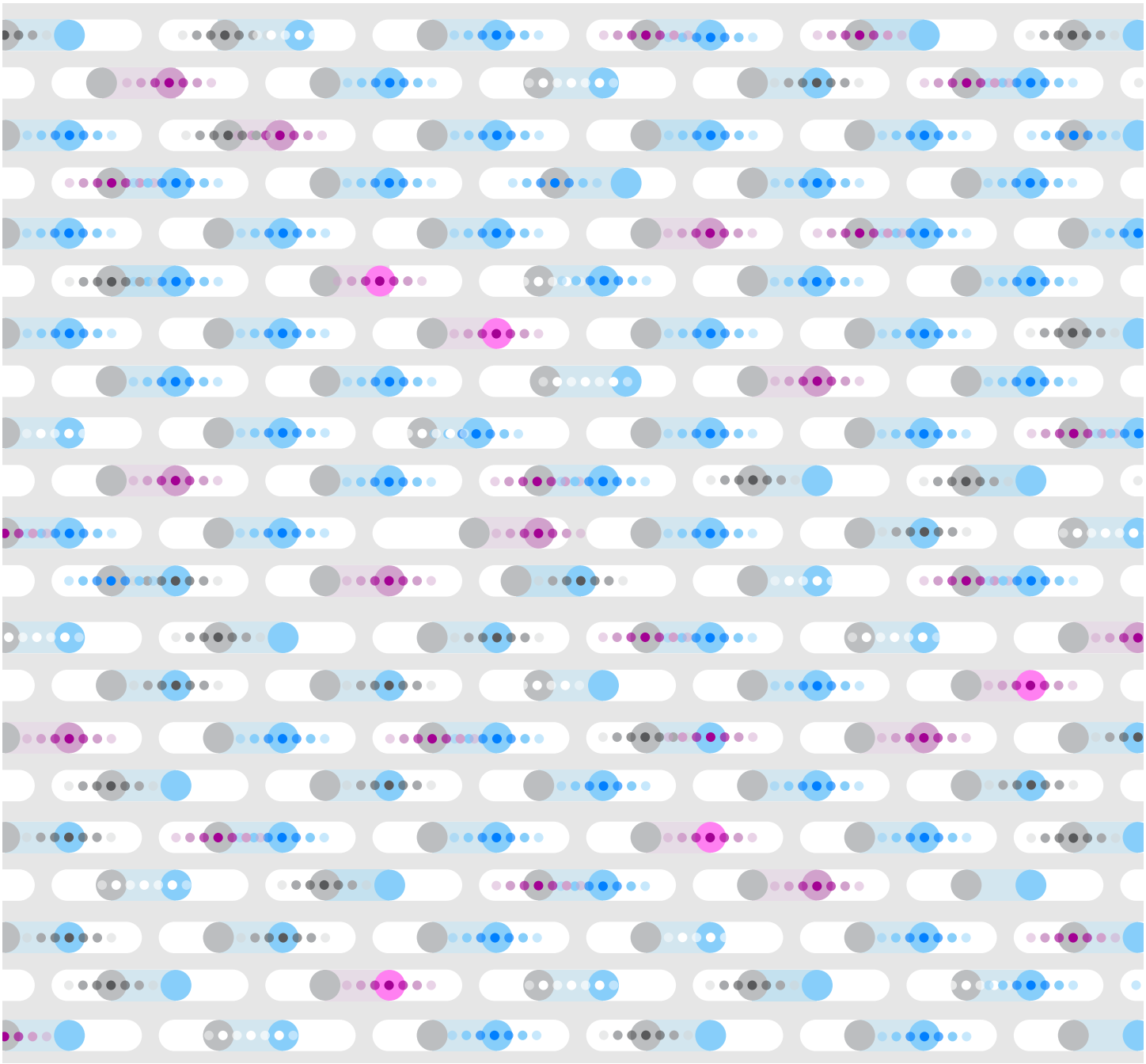

Mid-career Transitions

Needs Assessment Report

June 2024

Blueprint

This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

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About the Future Skills Centre

The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

About Blueprint

Blueprint was founded on the simple idea that evidence is a powerful tool for change. We work with policymakers and practitioners to create and use evidence to solve complex policy and program challenges. Our vision is a social policy ecosystem where evidence is used to improve lives, build better systems and policies and drive social change.

Our team brings together a multidisciplinary group of professionals with diverse capabilities in policy research, data analysis, design, evaluation, implementation and knowledge mobilization.

As a consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to collaboratively generate and use evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges.

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Canada

Preface

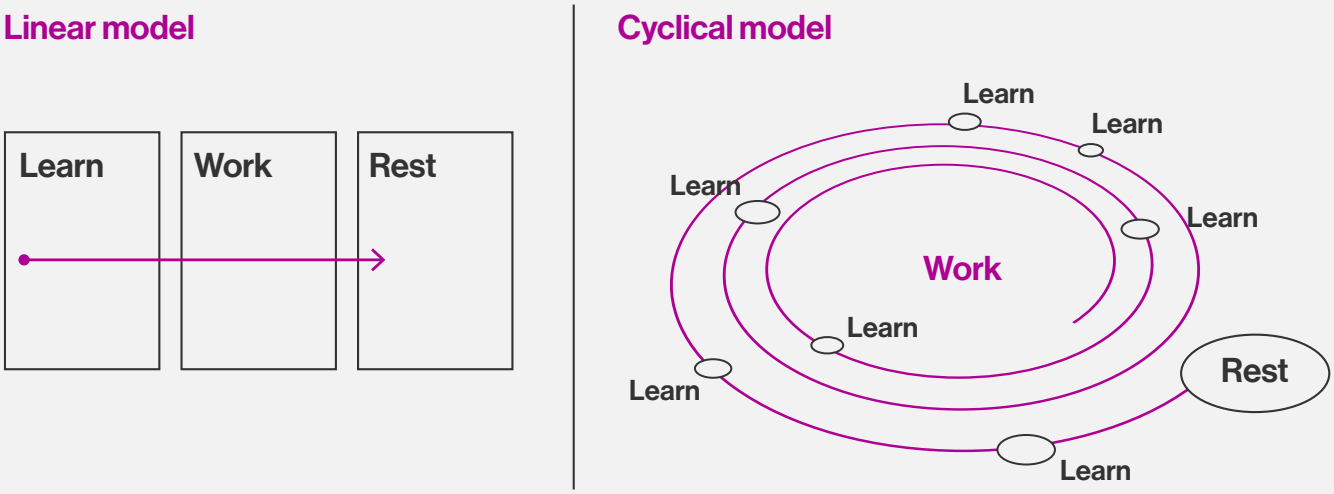
More and more Canadians are changing jobs or industries throughout their working lives. They're doing so as a matter of choice—as a means of achieving dynamic and fulfilling careers—as well as in reaction to seismic shifts in the labour market: from increased automation and the rise of the gig economy to the pandemic and climate change. To thrive in this landscape, workers must reinvent themselves in their existing sector or pivot to new opportunities in emerging industries. They must be ready to **upskill**, **reskill** and **transition to new careers** as needed. But to achieve such agility, we must fundamentally rethink our traditional notions of work and learning.

Canada's **learning ecosystem** is based on a **linear model**: one where people learn through our education system, earn through participation in the labour market, then rest through retirement. Supporting this **"learn-work-rest" lifecycle** are two pillars: a public education system that provides knowledge and skills before individuals enter the labour market and a publicly funded employment service that helps unemployed people quickly re-enter it.

In today's rapidly changing economy, however, a linear path of learning is no longer tenable. Today, individuals seeking to upgrade their skills, make meaningful career transitions and keep pace with the changing nature of work must embrace the roles of both worker and learner simultaneously. In other words, they must engage in a **continuous cycle of skill development throughout their working lives**. Likewise, employment services designed to help older, unemployed adults rapidly find work represent a **"fail first" approach**—and leave a glaring gap for those seeking to **upskill and reskill while remaining employed**.

We are missing a crucial **"third pillar"** in Canada's learning ecosystem: **skills development and career services for working-age, employed Canadians—including those in precarious jobs and transforming industries, and those facing imminent disruption.**

| Figure 1 | Moving from a linear to cyclical learning model



For workers, adequate **career services** can facilitate smoother transitions; reduce barriers to information, training and employment; and foster confidence and self-awareness for better career decision-making. These services can also help employers identify and express their current and future skills needs, improving visibility among workers and aiding in skills matching.

However, compared to adults from other peer jurisdictions, Canadian workers are not actively using career services, and those who are aware of these services struggle to access them through the restrictive eligibility criteria of our fail-first model. Career development practitioners have a growing list of responsibilities in terms of scope and sophistication but have few resources or professional development opportunities to update their knowledge or expertise. On the employer side, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often lack the workforce planning expertise to define what skills their organizations need, now and in the future, and aren't getting the support they need from government-funded employment services.

In response, the **Future Skills Centre (FSC)** and **Blueprint** have launched the *Re-imagining Career Services* initiative (formerly called *Responsive Career Pathways*). *Re-imagining Career Services* is **developing innovative, future-oriented skills development and career service models to better support workers and employers facing labour market disruptions, especially mid-career workers and SME employers that are set to experience increasing economic uncertainty.**

Together with our partners—The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF), MixtMode, The Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology (MITT), The Training Group at Douglas College (DC) and The Nova Scotia Departments of Labour, Skills and Immigration and Economic Development—Blueprint is leading three user-centred innovation projects. Our goal is to design and test new approaches to skills development and career services and generate evidence to inform a future third pillar of Canada's learning ecosystem that focuses on working adults.

About this report

This report presents findings from the Needs Assessment phase for the Mid-career Transitions project: one of three projects in the *Re-imagining Career Services* initiative.[1]

Led by the Manitoba Institute of Technology and Trades (MITT) in Winnipeg, Manitoba and the Training Group at Douglas College (DC) in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia, the Needs Assessment phase explored the labour market experiences and challenges of mid-career workers and small- and medium-size enterprises (SMEs)—both of which are underserved population groups within the current career development service landscape. Partners conducted this research to help inform the design of innovative career development interventions that would be tailored to the needs of both groups.

Findings presented below are drawn from data collected between February and May 2023 across MB and BC. This report is organized into four sections:

1. **Introduction** (pgs. 9–12) outlines the motivating forces behind the Mid-career Transitions project, explaining how we're designing and testing service models to support mid-career workers and SMEs through both a Needs Assessment phase (captured in this report) and then by developing career development service prototypes based on our learnings.
2. **Methodology** (pgs. 13–18) discusses Blueprint's evidence generation approach before noting our learning agenda for the Needs Assessment phase. We describe our participant recruitment efforts and data collection tools; data sources and limitations; and both a sociodemographic summary of mid-career workers and profiles of SME employers participating in the study.
3. **Findings** (pgs. 19–32) first explores the motivations and challenges related to career transitions for mid-career workers, then presents the priorities, goals and challenges related to workforce development for SME employers. We list the supports needed by both groups and investigate the possibility of a dual-client service model.
4. **Conclusions and Next Steps** (pg. 33) provides a summary of our key learnings from the Needs Assessment and poses several questions for further research.

1 Our other two projects are described in greater detail in the *Reimagining Career Services for the Future of Work* report. The first is the Nova Scotia Dual Client Public Employment Services Project (otherwise known as the Thriving Workplaces project), which is designing and testing services for SMEs that could be integrated into the Nova Scotia Works public employment services system to achieve a dual-client service model that meets the needs of both individuals and SMEs. Partners include the Government of Nova Scotia, CCDF and MixtMode. The second project is the Career Development Professional Centre (CDPC), which is building a pan-Canadian, virtual professional centre of excellence that provides access to the necessary training, resources and learning community for CDPs to respond to new and changing needs within the sector, and in alignment with the new Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals. Our partners for the CDPC are CCDF and MixtMode Consulting.

Executive summary

This report presents findings from the Needs Assessment phase of the Mid-career Transitions project—part of the *Re-imagining Career Services* initiative led by the Future Skills Centre and Blueprint. This assessment was conducted by the Manitoba Institute of Technology and Trades (MITT) and the Training Group at Douglas College from February to May 2023 in Manitoba and British Columbia. Blueprint analyzed the data and produced the findings for this report.

Research explored the career transition experiences and challenges faced by mid-career workers and the workforce development priorities and challenges of small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) employers. Partners utilized a mixed-methods approach, including intake surveys of 92 mid-career workers and 10 SME employers, as well as in-depth questionnaires and interviews with all employers and 43 of the recruited workers.

Key findings

Priorities, goals and challenges of mid-career workers

- Mid-career workers engaged by research partners were motivated to seek transitions because they wanted fulfilling, meaningful and dynamic careers—with opportunities for growth and advancement, and with work-life balance and flexibility—beyond just good pay and benefits.
- Different archetypes of mid-career workers showed varying motivations and capacities to make career transitions. These challenges were both psychological and practical—each group had a different sense of their capacity to engage in career transition, as well as varied access to skills development, time, money and/or support from their employers. Accordingly, each archetype may benefit from different types of supports around confidence-building, career exploration, goal articulation, action planning and skills development.
  - **Career Impasse-ers** were unfulfilled at work but felt relatively comfortable with their current situation; though they were interested in making a change, they needed support to build confidence, overcome anxiety and rediscover motivation. This archetype had limited capacity to reflect on their transitions and limited visions for their future.
  - **Transition Explorers** enjoyed their sectors but felt undercompensated or that they were stagnating. They were curious about other roles and functions and willing to act—but needed help overcoming uncertainties around the value and outcomes of career transitions. Transition Explorers wanted to learn how to better articulate their specific career goals and map pathways to achieve them.
  - **Active Career Navigators** were already motivated to upskill, reskill and/or plan their next career moves. However, this archetype still required support in refining their action plans and building skills and resources to implement their transitions effectively. Nevertheless, Active Career Navigators faced practical barriers like limited time, money and employer support for upskilling.
- Challenges were often amplified for skilled immigrant workers—our systems do not adequately support newcomers hoping to transfer their skills, qualifications and experiences to the Canadian context, especially at the mid-career stage.

Priorities, goals and challenges of SME employers

- SME employers were particularly vulnerable to labour market disruptions and struggled to plan proactively for their future workforce needs, often being forced to react to current situations. This was especially acute for very small businesses.
- These employers faced significant difficulties in hiring and recruiting suitable mid-level and senior candidates with highly specific skill sets, technical expertise and relevant professional experiences required for roles. Skills shortages in the local labour market, unique job requirements with rare skillsets, and misalignment of values or workplace culture expectations posed challenges in finding the 'right fit' candidates.
- Though acknowledging the importance of workforce development, SMEs had limited capacity, resources and expertise to proactively support employee training, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities within their organizations. They cited workload constraints, lack of understanding of specialized employee skills needs and uncertainty about the return on investment from external training as key barriers.
- SME employers needed assistance in identifying suitable training programs tailored to their workforce needs, guidance on facilitating productive career conversations with employees and tools to map clear career pathways to develop internal talent pipelines.

Opportunities for dual-client service models

Our findings suggest a **timely opportunity for career development services that could be tailored to benefit both audiences**; they highlight common supports that could address both groups' needs, leverage their interests and provide mutual benefits.

Shared interests between mid-career workers and SME employers include:

- the retention of workers and long-term employment relationships;
- developing greater capacities for skills development and career advancement;
- low-risk investments in upskilling and development activities; and
- proactive communication and alignment of workforce and career development goals.

Potential directions for services to address these common needs could include:

- organization-specific career pathways with updated job descriptions outlining skills and competencies;
- targeted training programs for workers' current roles (and to allow for long-term growth);
- mechanisms for employers to take stock of employees' current skillsets and interests (and, generally speaking, additional tools/processes to facilitate career development discussions between employers and workers); and
- guidance for internal mobility, promotions and to align employee growth with organizational goals.

The report concludes by outlining next steps: a co-design phase where the project partners developed and tested prototype career development service models tailored to the needs of both workers and employers. The findings from this Needs Assessment directly informed the design of these dual-client service approaches. A *Final Report* will summarize the service model and the findings from testing it in the field.

1. Introduction

Canada's labour market is changing, but our learning ecosystem is not designed to support lifelong learning and career transitions.

Canada's labour market is undergoing significant transformations due to globalization, automation, an aging populace and the profound impacts of COVID-19.

More than ever, Canadians can expect to face more frequent job and career changes throughout their lives. According to a 2021 McKinsey report,[2] one in 16 workers may have to shift occupations by 2030—and many types of jobs may be at higher risk of disruption than others. Simultaneously, businesses, especially small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), must actively prepare for change and ensure their workforces are equipped with the right skills and knowledge to meet emerging demands.

However—and as outlined in our **Preface**—Canada's current learning ecosystem is not designed to support the needs of mid-career workers and SMEs at risk. The Advisory Council on Economic Growth's *Learning Nation Report*[3] identified a crucial but missing "third pillar" in Canada's learning ecosystem: high-quality skills development and career services that support: i) working adults seeking to upgrade their skills and make meaningful career transitions; and ii) SMEs hoping to attract and retain talent and develop their workforce (see **Box 1** for definitions of terms discussed throughout this report).

2 Lund, S., Madgavkar, A., Manyika, J., Smit, S., Ellingrud, K., & Robinson, O. (2021, February). *The future of work after COVID.* McKinsey Global Institute. https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19#/

3 Advisory Council on Economic Development. (2017, December 1). *Learning nation: Equipping Canada's workforce with skills for the future*. Government of Canada. https://www.budget.canada.ca/aceg-ccce/pdf/learning-nation-eng.pdf

Box 1 | Defining key terms

- **Mid-career workers:** We define mid-career workers as any employed persons eligible to work in Canada, from any industry and/or occupation, who have some years of experience in the labour market and are some years away from retirement. "Mid-career worker" should not be confused with "mid-level professional worker"—a designation implying a level in a hierarchical organizational structure—although there can be overlap between the two.
- **Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs):** Small businesses are organizations with 1–99 employees, and medium-sized businesses employ between 100 and 499 people.
- **Career development:** The Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC) defines career development as "the lifelong process of managing learning, work, leisure, and transitions in order to move toward a personally determined and evolving preferred future." Each person's career development pathway is influenced by a wide range of factors beyond employment, including interests, abilities, values, personality, background and other circumstances. In this sense, the concept of career development encompasses the cultivation of the whole person and requires continual decision-making as circumstances change.
- **Workforce development:** Employers can lead workforce development efforts by equipping their organization with the right workers and by preparing them with the skills necessary for specific jobs. Typical activities include recruitment, hiring, identifying skill requirements for all roles and managing performance against them, identifying new roles for business expansion and providing skill development opportunities, either internally or externally. Providing avenues for retention and career development is an increasingly important element of this activity.

Future-proofing mid-career workers and SMEs is critical to a resilient labour market.

In Canada, 99.7% of businesses are SMEs, and these businesses employ over half (54%) of working individuals in the country.[4] Helping mid-career workers and SMEs proactively anticipate and navigate labour market disruptions, and at scale, has the potential for significant economic impacts. Ensuring that mid-career workers have access to the right opportunities for career growth and mobility while navigating dynamic labour market landscapes can unlock their full economic potential. By equipping SME employers with the right tools and resources to nurture their employees' development alongside their business needs, we can help employers address economic challenges around recruiting and retention, succession planning, and their resiliency and readiness to face future disruptions.

4 Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. (2024, March 18). *Key small business statistics 2023*. Government of Canada. https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/sme-research-statistics/en/key-small-business-statistics/key-small-business-statistics-2023

Career development services can play a critical role—but more evidence is needed.

Evidence from Canadian and international literature suggest career development services can indeed empower individuals to make informed career decisions, acquire necessary skills and navigate their career pathways in the labour market. These services result in greater job satisfaction, fulfillment and economic outcomes.[5,6,7] Existing research, however, has focused primarily on individuals who are unemployed and/or distant from the labour market. Little research has focused on SME employers or those who are *already* employed.

This knowledge gap is particularly evident in Canada, where there is a profound systems gap that perpetuates it. As outlined in the research for Phase One of Blueprint's *Re-imagining Career Services*, publicly funded career and employment systems do not proactively support those already working (including workers in precarious and changing industries)—and they do not meet the needs of employers and their employees.

To address these gaps, the Mid-career Transitions project is designing and testing service models to support mid-career workers and SMEs.

Given that mid-career workers and SMEs will continue to face significant disruptions and need to prepare for more dynamic careers, there is an urgent need to innovate in the field of career development. In response, the Mid-career Transitions project is co-designing and testing dual-client career service models with mid-career workers and SME employers to benefit both sides of the labour market. To do so, Blueprint engaged two organizations with considerable experience working with workers and employers to address their employment and skills needs: the Manitoba Institute of Technology and Trades (MITT) in Winnipeg, Manitoba and the Training Group at Douglas College (DC) in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia (see **Box 2**).[8]

In the first phase of the project (from February to May 2023), our partners conducted an extensive Needs Assessment to build an understanding of: (a) the perspectives, attitudes and career transition and development needs of mid-career workers currently seeking career transitions;[9] and (b) the perspectives, attitudes and needs of SME employers hoping to support and develop their workforces. Our partners distributed questionnaires and conducted interviews with both mid-career workers and SME employers with evidence generation support from Blueprint (see section **2.3 Recruitment, data collection tools and approaches** for more details on our methodology). This report provides an analysis of all data collected from this period.

5 Reese, R., & Miller, C. (2006). Effects of a university career development course on career decision-making self-efficacy. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 14, 252–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072705274985

6 Bimrose, J., & Barnes, S. A. (2006). Is career guidance effective? Evidence from a longitudinal study in England. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 15(2), 19–25. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/103841620601500205

7 Harrington, T. F., & Harrington, T. A. (2006). Practice and research in career counseling and development – 2005. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 55(2), 98–167. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2006.tb00010.x

8 Partners were identified based on their past working relationship with Blueprint and their expertise in engaging working people and employers outside of the publicly funded employment service system.

9 It is also important to explore the motivations and needs of working Canadians who are at risk of disruption yet not actively thinking about career transitions.

Box 2 | Project partners

The Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology (MITT) is a post-secondary education provider based in Winnipeg, Manitoba that provides technical training across several key industries, including skilled trades, manufacturing and healthcare. The college works closely with industry to identify critical technical and Success@Work Skills gaps and address them through training programs, using practicums, mentorships and career development to build connections between employers and learners.

The Training Group at Douglas College in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia delivers government-funded training and employment programming for individuals and employers alongside a range of other services, including essential skills training, language services for newcomers and self-employment training. The Training Group has significant experience and expertise in program development, implementation and improvement within BC's publicly funded employment services system, as well as in demonstrating new innovations outside of it.

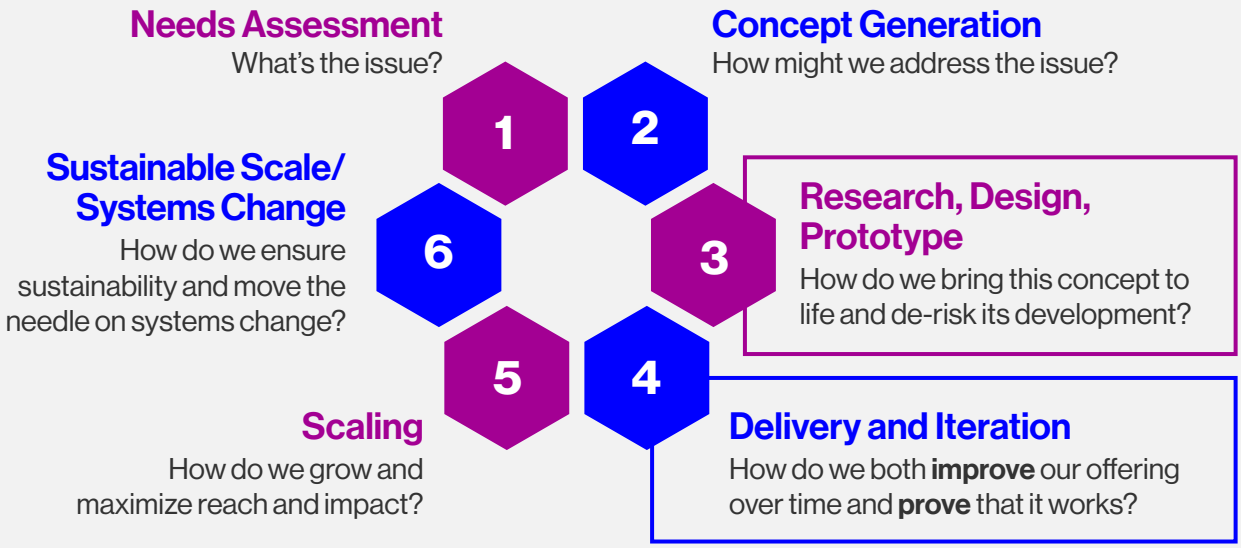
Next, based on their practice expertise—and based on key insights from this Needs Assessment process—our partners designed innovative, dual-client career intervention models. From May to November 2023, MITT and DC engaged a portion of their worker and employer participants in a co-design process. This involved developing an initial service prototype, testing it with users, gathering feedback and iterating the service model based on that feedback. At the completion of this co-design phase, partners reviewed participants' responses to refine their respective prototypes. At the time of this writing (June 2024), the project partners are testing and iterating their prototypes with newly recruited participants. For more information on this and upcoming stages of the project, see section **4. Conclusions and next steps**.

2. Methodology

2.1 Blueprint's evidence generation approach

To understand promising career service models and how to scale them, Blueprint developed a novel approach to evidence generation that fits within the six stages of the innovation cycle (see **Figure 2**). In a well-functioning ecosystem, innovations move along the cycle starting with a needs assessment, moving to conceptualization and design and then to delivery, testing and iteration. For those interventions proven to work, the goal is to expand to meet the need at scale and create system changes to institutionalize the innovation.

Figure 2 | **The Six-stage Innovation Cycle**



Knowing where an intervention is in the innovation cycle allows us to ask the right questions and collect the right evidence to move the project forward. The three *Response Career Services* projects are currently in Stages 1 to 3 of the innovation cycle. This means our emphasis is on co-designing models with partners and end users and developing and testing multiple iterations. Our evidence generation approach aims to move each project through Stages 3 and 4 via a better understanding of user needs and data-driven, continuous improvement. Interventions typically progress to Stage 4, when they are deemed full models, meaning they are developed with all anticipated components and future changes are expected to focus on continuous improvement.

This report focuses on findings from **Stage 1: Needs Assessment**, when MITT, DC and Blueprint focused on exploring the career transition challenges, mindsets and needs of mid-career workers and SME employers. Insights and themes from this phase then informed the co-design of a service prototype tailored to the needs of both user groups. Prototypes will be described in greater detail in a *Final Report*.

2.2 Learning agenda for the needs assessment phase

Our Needs Assessment phase was guided by the following research questions:

- What are mid-career workers' motivations and challenges related to career transitions?
- What are SME employers' priorities, goals and challenges related to workforce development?
- What supports do mid-career workers and SME employers need to address their challenges?
- Is there an opportunity to design and test dual-client service models that address the needs of both groups?

2.3 Recruitment, data collection tools and approaches

a. Participant recruitment and data collection

It was critical for project leads to have a first-hand understanding of their users' challenges and needs to inform their service models and initial design activities. Accordingly, MITT and DC led all recruitment and data collection activities. Data collection tools were developed in partnership with Blueprint to ensure the inclusion of indicators necessary for our evidence generation approach, described in section **2.1**.

MITT and DC recruited mid-career workers through their independent platforms and channels, including through mailing lists and social media accounts. Institutions deployed messaging that encouraged the voluntary participation of workers who already had some willingness, interest or intention to make a career transition. **In other words, the partners attempted to reach working Canadians who were actively thinking about career options, changing jobs/industries or were at risk of disruption.** Without needing to set recruitment goals, both institutions received overwhelming interest from mid-career workers and were forced to cap participation.

MITT and DC also recruited SME employers, using mailing lists and social media platforms as above as well as their connections from past services. As both MITT and DC expected, employers tended to be more difficult to engage than workers, as they were deeply occupied with managing their business activities and navigating current challenges. In this phase of the project, only MITT was able to recruit employers to participate.

Both institutions conducted intake surveys and semi-structured interviews with their participants between March and May 2023. The partners recorded and transcribed the interviews and made them available for Blueprint for analysis. Blueprint analyzed data from the intake surveys, interviews with approximately half of the mid-career worker participants and interviews with all SME employers (see **Table 1** on page 16), which provided rich, nuanced insights into participants' thoughts, emotions, behaviours and experiences associated with career transitions and workforce development.

b. Mobilizing human-centred design analytical tools to support thematic analysis for mid-career workers

Blueprint analyzed questionnaire (n=92) and interview (n=43) data from both institutions (see **Table 1** for a list of data sources) to identify common themes related to participants' challenges and needs.

To make sense of the qualitative data, we leveraged the concept of **"archetypes,"** drawn from human-centred design practice, as an analytical method to surface patterns in mid-career worker participants' mindsets, pain points, aspirations, motivations and behaviours (see **Box 3** for more information on archetypes). While the archetypes described in this report should not be taken as highly robust, nor should they be generalized to other mid-career workers (due to our relatively small sample size), they can help identify recurring patterns and pinpoint design principles that may best resonate with users.

Box 3 | What are archetypes—and how do they help us understand users?

Archetypes represent typical patterns of behaviour, values, priorities, preferences and/or characteristics observed across different individuals or user groups. Identifying archetypes can help program and service designers better characterize different types of target users, understand their perspectives and needs and develop supports that are most appropriate for them. According to Yale University's Information Technology Services UX team,[10] archetypes can "bring focus to the user insight and the user insight alone [without putting] labels on the user" and can support an inclusive design approach.

Archetypes do not represent static and enduring patterns of behaviour and mindsets. It is important to note that career journeys and life circumstances are dynamic, and as individuals navigate their career journeys, they may shift between them.

10 Yale University. (2024). *Usability & web accessibility: Archetypes and personas.* https://usability.yale.edu/understanding-your-user/archetypes-and-personas

Table 1 | Data sources

	Data source	Description	MITT sample size	DC sample size
Mid-career workers	**Project intake questionnaire**	Collected sociodemographic information on gender, citizenship and immigration history, education level and current occupation.	40	52
	Semi-structured interviews	Open-ended questions that gathered information about participants' career development goals, interests and needs.	25	18
SME employers	**Project intake questionnaire**	Collected characteristics about the employer organization, including size, industry, etc.	10	N/A
	Semi-structured interviews	Open-ended questions that gathered information about employers' workforce development experiences, goals and challenges.	10	N/A

2.4 Data limitations

The study focused on workers already interested in transitioning. As described above, participant recruitment focused on engaging mid-career workers who also had the intention of changing jobs or occupations, or were open to the idea; thus, findings do not reflect the needs of all working Canadians who are at risk of disruption.

Researchers engaged a relatively small sample of mid-career workers and SME employers. Therefore, findings should not be generalized to represent *all* mid-career workers and SME employers, nor to the general population.

2.5 Participant sample

a. Mid-career workers

MITT engaged 40 mid-career workers and DC engaged 52, for a total of 92 participants. Participants were mostly women (70%) and between the ages of 25 and 54 (93%). Almost half (46%) were a primary caregiver of at least one household member 17 years old or younger. Most held a university degree, with 28% holding a bachelor's degree and 37% holding a higher level. Notably, 48% of participants were not born in Canada, with 21% being permanent residents. Eighty-two percent of participants were employed on a full-time basis and 30% of participants had more than one job. Almost all participants (92%, or 85/92) worked in occupations commonly viewed as 'white collar' jobs (i.e., in an office setting). See **Table 2** for a demographic breakdown of respondents.

Table 2 | Demographic profile of mid-career worker participants

	Sociodemographic Characteristic	% Participants (n=92)
Gender	Woman	70% (64/92)
	Man	29% (27/92)
	Non-binary	1% (1/92)
Age	20 to 24 years	3% (3/92)
	25 to 34 years	29% (27/92)
	35 to 44 years	39% (36/92)
	45 to 54 years	25% (23/92)
	55 to 59 years	2% (2/92)
	60+ years	1% (1/92)
Primary Caregiver of Household Member 17 Years Old and Under	Yes	46% (42/92)
	No	53% (49/92)
Citizenship and Immigration History	Citizen	52% (48/92)
	Naturalized citizen	22% (20/92)
	Permanent resident (including newcomer and immigrants)	21% (19/92)
	Newcomer: non-resident or unspecified status	5% (5/92)
Highest Education Level Attained	High school diploma or equivalency certificate	10% (9/92)
	Registered Apprenticeship or other trades certificate or diploma	3% (3/92)
	College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	13% (12/92)
	University certificate, diploma or degree below bachelor level	9% (8/92)
	University bachelor's degree (e.g., B.A., B.A. (Hons.), B.SC., B.Ed., LL.B.)	28% (26/92)
	University degree, certificate or diploma above bachelor level	37% (34/92)
Employment Circumstances	Working full-time for an employer	82% (75/92)
	Working part-time, freelance or on-call for an employer	16% (15/92)
	Has one or more additional job(s)	30% (28/92)

Household Income Before Taxes and Deductions (MITT)*		**Personal Annual Income Before Taxes and Deductions (DC)***	
$20,000–$40,000	12.5% (5/40)	Under $20,000	2% (1/52)
$40,000–$60,000	15% (6/40)	$20,000–$39,999	10% (5/52)
$60,001–$80,000	7.5% (3/40)	$40,000–$59,999	35% (18/52)
$80,001–$100,000	10% (4/40)	$60,000–$79,999	64% (16/52)
Over $100,000	40% (16/40)	$80,000–$99,999	10% (5/52)
Unknown	15% (6/40)	$100,000 or more	10% (5/52)
		Unknown	4% (2/52)

* MITT and DC collected income levels using different parameters due to varied interpretation of 'income level' when provided with research materials.

	Sociodemographic Characteristic	% Participants (n=92)
Most Common Sectors and/or Occupations	Administration	10.9% (10/92)
	Project management and coordination	9.8% (9/92)
	Accounting and finance	7.6% (7/92)
	Frontline social services	7.6% (7/92)
	Customer service, retail and sales	7.6% (7/92)
	Business management	6.5% (6/92)
	Human resources	6.5% (6/92)
	Financial services	5.4% (5/92)
	Healthcare professional	5.4% (5/92)
	Supervisor	5.4% (5/92)
	Engineering and design	4.4% (4/92)

b. SME employers

Overall, MITT engaged **10 individuals in hiring roles from 10 SMEs**. To cast as wide a net as possible, MITT recruited SME employers from a **variety of sectors**: supply chain, social services, retail, non-profit social services, healthcare, construction, technology, arts and culture, accounting and finance, and caregiving. Most SME employers were either very small (5/10 business had fewer than 50 employees) or on the larger end of the medium-sized designation (3/10 businesses had between 300 and 500 employees). Most (8/10) were for-profit employers. Notably, all employer participants with over 50 staff members had dedicated HR functions within their organizations; only one of the 'very small' organizations had an HR function. See **Table 3** for a summary of SME employer profiles.

Table 3 | Profile of SME employer participants

	Characteristics	% of Participants (n=10)
Size	Very Small (2–49)	50% (5/10)
	Small (50–99)	10% (1/10)
	Medium, Lower End (100–249)	10% (1/10)
	Medium, Higher End (300–499)	30% (3/10)
Profit Model	For-profit	70% (7/10)
	Nonprofit	30% (3/10)
Unionization Status	Unionized	20% (2/10)
	Not Unionized	80% (8/10)
HR Departments	HR Function Within Organization	60% (6/10)
	No HR Function Within Organization	40% (4/10)

3. Findings

3.1 What are mid-career workers' motivations and challenges related to career transitions?

a. Mid-career workers were motivated to seek transitions because they wanted jobs that contributed to fulfilling, meaningful and dynamic careers.

When asked about what "career success" meant to them, mid-career workers shared that good pay and benefits were necessary but not sufficient means to enable thriving careers and a high quality of life. Notably, participants pointed to three key features of a position that would inspire them to make a career transition:

- **Work-life balance and flexibility that accommodated their lives outside of work:** Most participants had families and/or were part of larger communities outside of work that required their time and commitment. Several participants shared that they were struggling with balancing work and caregiving responsibilities; others hoped for more flexible work arrangements that would allow them to provide better care for children.

> "Of course, money is important, but I just want enough to be comfortable, so I don't need an insane salary. I guess work-life balance is a big one. [As is] being able to spend time with my family."
>
> — **Mid-career participant**

- **Opportunities for growth, development and advancement:** Many participants flagged upward progression and continuous learning as key indicators of career success. Several participants, especially those in professional services, were strongly motivated by the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills at work and felt that they would be "ready to leave" their workplace if they felt there was nothing more to learn.
- **Work that felt fulfilling and aligned with personal values:** Most participants expressed a need for alignment between their work, career and personal values (including maintaining work-life balance, wanting to have social impact and help others in their communities, etc.). Participants who felt that they were on the right career path often described their sense of fulfillment and meaning while those who were dissatisfied with their work discussed wanting to have more impact and/or feel more rewarded.

> "It's enough for me that I feel like my values and my morals and what I stand for is being, for lack of a better word, addressed or utilized."
>
> — **Mid-career participant**

When discussing career transitions, most mid-career workers were driven by internal motivations rather than by external disruptions. A few cited structural changes within their organizations that demanded a shift in their roles, but it was unclear whether such changes were a result of macrotrends, such as climate change and technological advancements, or changes within the organizations themselves.

b. Different archetypes of mid-career workers demonstrated varying motivations and capacities to make career transitions.

Our research surfaced three archetypes of mid-career workers looking for career transition support: **Career Impasse-ers, Transition Explorers** and **Active Career Navigators**. **Table 4** illustrates these archetypes in terms of current career circumstances, career aspirations and barriers to achieving them. As mentioned, these archetypes are not meant to be overly prescriptive or static labels. For example, individuals may strongly align with one archetype but also demonstrate features of another. Furthermore, as individuals navigate their career journeys and as their life circumstances change, they may also shift between archetypes.

Most mid-career workers participating in the research were already interested in making career transitions, so these archetypes do not capture working Canadians who are at risk of disruption but not actively thinking about career transitions.

Table 4 | Mid-career worker archetypes

	Career Impasse-ers	Transition Explorers	Active Career Navigators
Proportion of participants (n=43)	**16%**	**56%**	**28%**
Current career circumstances	Feel unfulfilled at work but are also very comfortable with current arrangements. Have little incentive to change.	Curious about alternative roles or functions. This could be within the same sector/company or outside. Some feel undercompensated or stagnating in their current occupation.	Feel it is time to move on from their current positions. Tend to have relatively clearer career goals and/or stronger motivations to make career transitions.
Career aspirations	Have some fears of being stuck in their current career pathway, but not very motivated to change.	Looking for opportunities to learn more about other functions and occupations and ways to shift into them. Open to alternative positions if available.	Looking for opportunities to advance within their organization and/or to become more specialized in their fields.
Barriers to achieving aspirations	Are anxious and uncertain about change. Have a limited capacity to reflect on career transitions and a limited vision for career future.	Limited planning and little action taken to explore options. Uncertainty about whether investing in career transitions will lead to predictable advancements and outcomes.	May have uncertainties about navigating career pathways in their occupations of interest. Often have limited time and financial resources to pursue upskilling.

1) Career Impasse-ers

Limited career clarity and vision for the future, leading to inertia around taking action

Sixteen percent of those who participated in interviews could be characterized as Career Impasse-ers. This is a relatively small portion of the sample, which is reasonable given that the project was designed to engage participants who were actively interested in exploring career transition services.

These individuals often felt **comfortable but not fulfilled in their current positions and could feel stuck in current jobs and career paths**. They also tended to have limited visions of what a thriving future could look like, which contributed to uncertainties and fears about unknown careers. Some representative quotations from Career Impasse-ers are below:

> "I feel like I stay just because it's such a big company."
>
> "If I were to completely go from this industry to something else, what would I do? Honestly, I don't know."
>
> "I get very comfortable in the position I'm in, and then I have a bad mentality of 'why fix what's not broken'? When in turn, down the road, it will be very broken if I'm still doing this in 10 to 15 years."

These participants often expressed that their **current lifestyle was associated with habit, routine and comfort**. While they acknowledged that a career transition held potential for greater fulfillment, they also associated it with feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and risk. These factors contributed to inertia around beginning a transition.

> "So, I actually refrain from job searching ... because I'm like, okay, but then I have to do an interview ... I'm very social, but I'm also a very socially anxious person ... the thought of starting a new job is terrifying for me."
>
> "There's a bit of anxiety to [long-term] goals."

Career Impasse-ers also shared that they **did not always get the opportunity to reflect on their career dissatisfaction** as they were too busy with other obligations. Many responsibilities limited their capacity to imagine a different future, as expressed in the quotation below:

> "I might wake up when I'm 45 and be like, 'I hate this and want to do a 180 shift,' but not right now ... Right now, I don't want to have to think about that just because I'm so busy. We're so busy with our house and family and kids."

2) Transition Explorers

Have career aspirations but hesitate to act as they want a better understanding of potential positive impacts

The majority (56%) of participants in the study could be characterized as Transition Explorers, as they were contemplating options to advance from their position, shift career paths and/or move to a different organization. They were also considering how their current mix of experiences, skills, education and sectors of interest might match or be transferable to new roles.

Some fitting within this archetype were actively contemplating career transitions due to dissatisfaction with one or two aspects of their current work situation. Several participants mentioned feeling **under-compensated** for their work and that they were **stagnating** and needing an opportunity to grow and advance, as illustrated by the quotations below:

> "I am happy where I am at now, but I feel that now that I've seen the value that I am able to bring to the table, I don't feel that I am being compensated to the level of the return that I'm giving because I've been looking around [at other job opportunities]."
>
> "I just need to know that I'm going forward, [but] I'm not right now. I feel kind of like, is this it? I believe that progression is ... a benchmark for success."

Transition Explorers were often exposed to alternative career options by their colleagues, friends and other life experiences. They expressed openness to explore different functions and roles within their organization and/or industry or to transition to a different industry altogether. For example, several participants signalled that they hoped to shift from front-line to back-end work or were interested in advancing to a management position after seeing other colleagues' responsibilities. Some were choosing between different specialization pathways within their profession, and a few were interested in starting over in a new field.

While Transition Explorers often had **some confidence in their transferable skills, experiences and/or capabilities** that could enable a career transition, they also recognized that career transitions may require significant time and financial investment in upskilling, which they were largely not prepared to commit to due to the uncertainty of outcomes:

> "I'm also interested in [a profession] where there's a lot of opportunities. It's just that I don't know if I could because I have a student loan. I would love to go back to school and upgrade my skills. I don't think I'm going to have to take another financial responsibility like that."
>
> "Because when someone asks you, 'Would you like to take a pay cut, work a different job for less money, and then also be paying to go to school every day and be tired, working constantly all the time?' it doesn't sound as appealing."

Despite their interest in career transitions, **few Transition Explorers had concrete plans and few had undertaken any planning or research**. Transition Explorers faced significant uncertainties about their career

aspirations. For some, this uncertainty was partially driven by a lack of knowledge and understanding about the specific roles, functions and occupations of the fields in which they were interested. This was especially the case for skilled immigrants who were currently working in a job unrelated to their past education and experiences but were considering options for returning to their field of focus.

> "I don't know [whether I want to move from non-profit to private industry again]; maybe it's because I haven't done the right research."
>
> "I would like to explore some options to see exactly if it's the avenue I want to go down."
>
> "I'm just staying here because I'm not quite clear on my career path in Canada ... I still need to improve my skillset to meet the needs. Yeah, so many options. Still seeking and not decided yet."

3) Active Career Navigators

Stronger motivations to make career transitions, but often face personal, circumstantial and/or systemic barriers to implement their plans.

About one-third (27%) of mid-career participants could be characterized as Active Career Navigators. Participants of this archetype often had some career goals, such as working in a specific occupation or obtaining a certain title in their organization. Many of these participants were knowledgeable about what opportunities exist in their career pathway and some understood the competencies and experiences required by positions ahead. In general, participants felt that training and/or certifications to fill skill gaps would be important, and many were actively spending time and money in professional development activities to advance their skills and competencies, such as conferences, workshops, online courses and certifications. As one participant expressed:

> "I regularly do courses. I'm working towards another designation and then I often do different webinars and workshops."

However, Active Career Navigators' upskilling activities were not always targeted, and effective training opportunities were often out of reach. Participants shared various barriers to career advancement and transitions, including barriers that were personal (e.g., financial burdens, lack of time), workplace-related (e.g., involving limited support from employers to pursue professional development) and sectoral (e.g., participants were confused when navigating certification processes and identifying the right training program to meet their transition needs). Workers reflected on barriers as such:

> "I get to my pillow at night and I'm thinking, where the heck is that accreditation [for the skills I have built so far]?' How are people going to believe me?"

> "I've got a student loan ... so I'm paying for my master's and my work was accommodating. They would let me take a course during my work week so that I didn't have to take time off, but then I did have to use a lot of my annual leave and bank time in order to attend some of the longer courses."

Overall, even with relatively greater clarity around career goals than Transition Explorers, Active Career Navigators still experienced challenges developing concrete career transition plans to achieve their goals; even when such plans exist, they perceived high costs and risks associated with self-funded reskilling and/or upskilling activities.

c. The challenges for mid-career workers are often amplified for skilled immigrants.

Newcomers and immigrants are in a state of disruption. Immigrants, especially those who are highly skilled, make a tremendous career transition by migrating to Canada. By doing so, they are disconnected from established professional networks, support systems and cultural touchstones, and often need to start from scratch in terms of career and connections.

There are systemic barriers that prevent skilled immigrants from transferring their credentials and work experiences to Canada. Participants in this study who were foreign-educated professionals often faced systemic and regulatory barriers to entering their sectors and/or occupations of interest. This was particularly true for participants attempting to enter regulated sectors that have high demand for foreign talent, including health care, engineering, education and financial services. To illustrate, one immigrant participant was unable to find work in the healthcare system in Canada despite having obtained a local license through examination. This participant cited a lack of Canadian work experience as the cause. There were no avenues, however, for them to gain Canadian work experience through volunteering as the sector was mostly unionized.

Stories like this suggest that settlement and employment services are not designed to support entry into mid-career positions. Several skilled immigrant participants with graduate-level educations cited difficult experiences working with settlement agencies. They received limited access to relevant guidance—and sometimes misleading advice—for navigating Canadian sectorial systems, including health care, education, engineering and human resources. Skilled immigrant participants also shared that settlement services focused on connecting them to entry-level or 'survival' jobs as soon as possible with little consideration or resources to connect them to mid- or senior-level positions. These entry-level survival jobs often had little relevance to their desired career paths, causing frustration and feelings of being trapped in dead-end occupations.

- To illustrate, one participant discussed having to navigate the professional sector on her own without any support: "That was kind of a shock for me, and when I came in, there were not a lot of services directly available for dentists. I really had to carve my own way through this." Eventually, this participant was able to identify the exams needed for dentistry certification, but it was financially draining, and she did not end up returning to her original occupation.
- One immigrant participant held a master's degree in special education and was told they could work in daycares only. They were only recently told that they could work in the school division, but "nobody told me that when we came here."

Moving into an unwelcoming labour market can dampen confidence and enthusiasm about building a successful career. Skilled immigrant participants often demonstrated a strong sense of career identity formed in their home countries and expressed desires to continue their career paths in Canada. In this sense, they often demonstrated characteristics of the Active Career Navigator archetype. However, most immigrant participants also expressed frustration and disappointment that their talents and potential were not being realized. Many had to pivot into alternative career paths that did not reflect their educational backgrounds. Several also discussed losing clarity around and hope for their career goals, signaling a shift towards the Career Impasse-er archetype.

> "I'm a PhD candidate. I've got this track record of work and achievement and so on. How is it that [my degree] means nothing compared to a few months of Canadian work experience? This is shattering, and I find myself utilizing less than one quarter of what I am capable of doing, and I would like a space to show what I can do."
>
> — **Immigrant mid-career worker participant**

For example, one immigrant participant had a graduate degree in human resources and practiced in their home country. When they came to Canada, they found a job in administration by chance. While they contemplated returning to human resources, they ultimately recognized that there would be financial costs and fewer benefits to doing so, and so decided against it.

3.2 What are SME employers' priorities, goals and challenges related to workforce development?

a. SME employers are particularly vulnerable to labour market and workforce disruptions and find it difficult to plan for a future workforce.

While the COVID-19 pandemic caused large-scale and intense disruptions to economic activities, small employers noted in interviews that they have always navigated industry and workforce challenges. They acknowledged that **further disruptions would continue to influence business operations**. One small retail employer participant mentioned that although they had been in business for over 30 years, they were currently struggling to keep up with technological and consumer behaviour shifts in the industry while navigating post-COVID norms around customer service. This participant noted that this was a common trend among many small employers across the service industry.

Necessary transitions in response to unanticipated disruption and constant change are difficult and draining for both employers and workers. Employers and their staff are trying to "figure it out" under changing contexts, norms and technologies with little support. One employer noted a lack of support from the retail sector to help small businesses "cut through the noise" and pinpoint priority areas for training and development, as the market currently has "too many apps to try, navigate, learn, manage and maintain." Keeping up with current operational and technological demands was occupying all of the employer's resources and time.

Overall, it can be arduous for small employers to plan proactively for their workforce needs; they are instead forced to **focus on reacting to current situations**, limiting sightlines on what will be needed to navigate upcoming disruptions.

b. SMEs struggle with hiring and recruiting ideal mid-level candidates and are turning to other strategies to improve talent development and retention.

Many SME employers needed mid- to senior-level workers with existing technical skills and professional experiences who could **start work with little onboarding and training or lead uncharted functions of the business with little guidance**. Employer participants often first looked internally to fill roles. But several participants noted there were often roles that were so highly specialized that they were "not always able to effectively develop people to [meet needs]." In other instances, employers were simply too overwhelmed to build skills internally.

> "What I have realized is I sometimes need somebody who just … they have, they know it. They're starting, they get it, they got it, they have the skills, and they move in. I can explain what we need and they just do it. And that's what I need because I don't have the time, I don't have the resources; I don't have the energy to [train] internally."
>
> — **Small employer participant**

Overall, SME employers faced **three key challenges** around hiring and recruitment:

1. **Some industries are facing a workforce shortage.** For example, one employer participant in the hospitality industry noted that there were currently "more jobs than people." Another participant in the construction industry highlighted challenges around a shrinking workforce in skilled trades.
2. **SME employers perceived themselves as less attractive to mid- and senior-level talent than large corporations.** This was particularly the case for nonprofit organizations that did not have core funding and faced financial constraints, as well as small employers in professional services who felt that large companies raised workers' expectations for wages. One small employer mentioned that current market salaries are unattainable for small businesses.
3. **Mid- to senior-level roles can require very specific and increasingly rare combinations of skills and experiences.** When asked about their ideal candidates, most SME employer participants, especially those in professional or regulated services, shared long lists of skills, competencies, subject matter expertise, certifications and degrees of professionalism that make a suitable candidate. Recruiting suitable mid- to senior-level talent at a reasonable wage is so difficult that SME employers are **starting to change their talent strategies to redeploy current staff towards such specialized roles and promote retention**. For example, several SME participants, both for-profit and nonprofit, have implemented policies around lay-off prevention, wellness days, extended group health benefits, summer hours and other work-life balance initiatives to create more fulfilling and attractive workplaces.

> "For us, customer service-focused people who want to truly make their customers happy have the skillsets we're looking for. Everything else within this industry, we can teach you how to do … The challenge is trying to find people who align with our vision and our core values and where we're going in the future."
>
> — **Medium-sized employer in the hospitality industry**

4. **Employers recognized the value of soft skills—but believed they could not be taught.** Soft skills—such as communication, time-management, creativity, problem solving and teamwork—were extremely important to employers, as were notions of value alignment. This was particularly the case for employers in the hospitality sector

and nonprofit social services. However, they often perceived soft skills and value alignment as **inherent qualities** in employees rather than skills that can be taught—making the task of finding the right fit even more challenging.

c. SME employers acknowledged the importance of workforce development for mid-career workers—but had limited capacity to support it.

All SME employer participants acknowledged that offering **a fulfilling job with a career future and building the right skills and experiences** were important for the organization. All respondents recognized that **skills development and advancement opportunities** would be necessary to enable **staff retention and improve productivity**.

Most employers would be keen to **support employee training, learning and development**, especially if employees were to **demonstrate initiative**. A few smaller employers shared that they were already actively coaching and sharing knowledge informally, and several medium-sized employers had formal in-house, role-specific training materials and programs. One employer in the construction industry also noted that they could access robust training opportunities offered by associations in the sector.

> "We've been trying to fill a senior role for two years ... [and] we've almost given up on trying to find people out there with relevant experience because it just never, we never find them ... I think we're going to have to switch to training them in-house and hoping they stay long enough."
>
> — **Small employer in engineering consulting**

While interviews with SME employers surfaced a strong interest in supporting workforce development, they also identified **three main capacity challenges** in providing career and skills development to employees:

- **Training is encouraged, but workload can get in the way.** Most employers saw the value in supporting employee training and development but noted an inability to prioritize training due to heavy workloads. For some organizations, staff were too busy to engage in upskilling programs. For others, senior-level staff were too busy to carve out time to coach and mentor junior colleagues. This was especially the case for very small employers and nonprofit organizations, where there were heavy workloads and little free capacity.
- **SME employers do not always understand the specialized skills their employees need and are unsure of where to send them for additional training.** For example, a medium-sized financial services employer implemented "a lot of changes and modifications to roles to keep current with technology," but mentioned that they "don't really know what the job is, because it's the first time that we've created that position." Staff who were implicated by these role changes were required to identify training options independently and strategize their own skills development to meet the demands of their new roles.

> "We're pretty liberal with applying training and don't generally hold back much. However, what does get in the way is work. People still need to execute their projects [and] need to complete their tasks, so there are times where people just can't fit the training in and push it off. So it often requires working extra hours to go to a course for a couple [of] days and still keep the job going."
>
> — **Medium-sized nonprofit employer**

- **SME employers, especially very small ones, do not feel well-informed enough to invest in external training for staff.** For example, a small retail employer was keen to develop staff skills with technology and software but had trouble identifying the "value-add and ROI" of the myriad of options in the skills development marketplace. Another small employer specializing in building engineering felt that the field was so specific that there was "no specific program for consulting engineering and building design [and] no direct training or coursework related to it."

d. Despite strong interest in developing and advancing existing employees, SMEs have constraints in career development opportunities, processes and capacity.

Overall, SME employer participants believed that career development was a "shared responsibility" between the employer and worker. **However, they all acknowledged that more could be done to support workers' career development more formally.** Employers pointed to needing **more proactive workforce and career development practices**. This is best illustrated by an anecdote from a medium-sized employer who discovered that the experiences and skills they needed for a new role had been within the organization all along:

- "I recently filled a business intelligence analyst position. And one of the employees that applied came from a completely different department. And when I looked at this person's resume, I was thinking, oh, my goodness, why did this person not say anything [earlier]? Or why didn't we flag this before? Because this is exactly what the person was doing back in their home country. But, you know, when they came to Canada, they started off as a teller and then moved into the back office and was really just processing loans. And after I spoke with this person, I learned this person was doing exactly what they applied to [do], and it was a failure on our end that we didn't have [more information and insight on their experience and skillsets]."

> "It is a shared responsibility; the commitment to lifelong learning does live inside the individual. But as an employer, we try to encourage it and support it through opportunities, through resources, [and] through trying to create a culture of improvement."—
>
> — **Medium-sized employer**

Interview data revealed that while most organizations implement regular performance reviews and check-ins with staff, they tended to be employer-centric and focused on where employees were lacking. None of the organizations had the tools or processes to guide employers and workers to **identify under-utilized strengths, skills and experiences proactively among employees that could contribute to productivity, nor did they provide opportunities for employee career development.**

SMEs also face challenges related to size in terms of developing existing employees. For small employers, the business may simply be too small to accommodate growth, as "there is nowhere for [employees] to grow into," meaning the only "path to advancement would be to leave the company and go somewhere else." Medium-sized employers often felt that employees who are not selected based on their internal applications may get "upset, or don't understand why they weren't chosen even though they were there longer."

3.3 What supports do mid-career workers and SMEs need to address their challenges?

a. One size does not fit all; different archetypes of mid-career workers and SME employers have distinct challenges that warrant different supports as solutions.

In interviews, mid-career workers and SME employers articulated their unique needs and shared numerous ideas for what would best support them. Blueprint has organized participants' ideas for support into three common subject areas: i) predominant needs; ii) desired allies; and iii) desired information, resources, tools and capacity. To re-iterate, individual mid-career workers have dynamic career journeys and can shift between different archetypes, and therefore express different support needs, at different periods in their lives. These supports are also not exclusive to any archetype, but merely outlined to illustrate needs most pertinent to each.

i. Most predominant needs

Given their unique career transition challenges, mid-career participants from the different archetypes expressed having substantially different support needs.

- **Career Impasse-ers** needed support to build confidence, explore their career interests through self-reflections and rediscover the motivation for change.
- **Transition Explorers** needed support to articulate specific career goals and map pathways and/or steps to get there through informed decision-making.
- **Active Career Navigators** needed support with more concrete actions—refining their career transition plans and building the skills, resources and tools to carry them out.

SME Employers needed supports to identify and articulate requirements for the ideal mid-career candidate to help fill immediate workforce gaps with the "right" hire—someone with the right skills and/or intention to stay—and build greater capacity for longer-term workforce planning and development. Employers needed more short-term, targeted training opportunities, as well as processes and tools to support conversations that explored how workers can continue to **grow within the organizations**.

ii. Desired allies

Mid-career participants identified four key allies who could play a role in providing needed supports. The first 'ally' was the **self**: participants were interested in continuous growth and improvement and in participating in activities to drive the career transition process. While some participants already possessed a great deal of independent career development capacity, others recognized that they needed more external support in building motivation.

Additionally, mid-career workers perceived **career development practitioners** (CDPs) as being able to support with career exploration, action planning, motivation, accountability and job search support. Participants saw **industry-specific mentors** as being able to provide sector/industry-specific advice and higher-level guidance that went beyond job-specific tasks. Fourth, participants viewed **employers** as

well-positioned to provide various opportunities for career development, including career-pathing, PD and improving work conditions. More specifically:

- **Career Impasse-ers** looked to "coach" figures (such as a CDPs or employers) to help them build motivation, set goals and action plans, and keep them accountable.
- **Transition Explorers** saw key allies in employers who could provide feedback on their performance, guide them toward potential directions for progression and offer support for upskilling. They also identified industry professionals who could provide mentorship and advice.
- **Active Career Navigators** relied on employers for financial and resourcing support for upskilling and employment services for resume and cover letter support.

SME employers also identified four key allies who could play a role in providing needed supports: **i) training institutions** to provide short-term training, certification programs and technical skill development programs for current staff; **ii) third-party recruiters** to support hiring and recruitment of new staff; **iii) HR and/or external consultants** to provide training in leadership skills, tools and resources for supporting career conversations and DEI (employers were also interested in having external support to map career progression pathways and develop formal skills competency frameworks); and **iv) existing employees** to initiate conversations around career progression and identify areas in which to contribute. Employers recognized the need for more senior employees to mentor and coach new hires and junior staff.

iii. Desired information, resources, tools and capacity

Participants engaged in this research identified a wide range of information, resources, tools and capacities to enable an appropriate career transition. The following section highlights some supports that would be particularly relevant for each mid-career worker archetype and SME employers:

- **Career Impasse-ers** needed basic information about alternative career options and their associated labour market outcomes; they also looked for more opportunities to discuss their careers, as well as guidance to better understand their existing skillsets and how they align with alternative career options. Participants of this archetype felt that tools like personality tests and skills assessments would be useful to help identify career possibilities and build hope.
- **Transition Explorers** indicated needing more targeted information (e.g. sector- and occupation-specific career pathing and upskilling requirements) and the financial and temporal capacity to identify their knowledge and skills gaps and engage in upskilling and/or certification activities. Transition Explorers also felt that mechanisms to gather feedback on their performance from their current employer, as well as career pathway maps at both the sector and organizational level, would benefit their decision-making.
- **Active Career Navigators** went a step further: this group looked for specific information around the knowledge, skills and certification they would need to transition to desired roles, and what steps they would need to take to achieve their career goals. Active Career Navigators were often in the process of identifying upskilling and/or job opportunities, which fuels their need for i) clarity on specific steps and strategies to achieve their career goal (e.g., to obtain a certain position within the sector); ii) targeted, specific and accessible upskilling programs; and iii) support in interpreting employer demands and articulating their skillsets and capabilities accordingly (i.e., with a greater focus on self-marketing and branding).

- **SME employers** identified the need for best practice guidelines for hiring and recruitment, including tailored job descriptions and recruitment materials deployed in appropriate channels; for real-time labour market information to inform decision-making; and for sector-informed advice on DEI considerations for recruiting new workers. They expressed a need for local-, short-term and just-in-time training and mentorship programs; the operational flexibility for their staff to pursue training and upskilling opportunities; and the flexibility for senior staff to train junior staff internally. Employers needed support for business succession, management and leadership training to hold more productive career conversations with staff (with prompts to guide career conversations and tools to articulate career pathways).

3.4 Is there an opportunity to design and test dual-client service models that address the needs of *both* groups?

a. Despite the wide range of needs discussed, mid-career workers and employers do share some common interests and support requirements.

While employers and workers have different objectives and priorities in any employment relationship, interviews with mid-career workers and SME employers suggest that there are also four key areas where parties shared common interests.

1. **Both parties value retention and long-term employment:** SME employers were keen to **retain workers** who could **develop and grow within the organization**. Mid-career workers would also **prefer to stay with the same employer** given adequate opportunities for career development. By developing organization-specific career pathways with up-to-date role descriptions and competencies, employers can encourage skill development without having to hire additional staff; meanwhile, mid-career workers can achieve long-term career growth and satisfaction without having to leave their jobs or sectors.
2. **Both parties need a greater capacity for development, growth and fulfillment:** Both mid-career workers and SME employers were interested in gaining greater capacity to **enable skills development and career advancement for staff**, creating more fulfilling roles and trajectories.
3. **Both parties need low-risk investments in upskilling and development:** Both SME employers and mid-career workers wanted to become **more informed about upskilling opportunities and related labour market outcomes** to ensure that they invest time, energy and money into the right upskilling activities for their needs.
4. **Both parties require more proactive communications to align workforce and career development:** Mid-career workers were looking for **more feedback and opportunities to grow** from their employers. SME employers were also eager to learn about the **strengths, skills and interests of their staff.**

These areas of intersecting interest present opportunities to develop dual-client supports—those that can simultaneously respond to the needs of both groups. **Table 4** highlights four sets of needs identified by workers and employers and the support services that could address them. These examples are for illustrative purposes and not meant to be prescriptive.

Table 4 | Highlights of similar supports identified by both mid-career workers and SMEs

Mid-career worker needs	Supports	SME employer needs
• Build confidence and strengths to inform additional skills development activities needed for advancement	Organization-specific career pathways with updated job descriptions in terms of skills and competencies	• Articulate skills and competencies needed for different positions • Support retention and longer-term workforce planning
• Learn skills that are relevant for their current position and contribute to longer-term career development	Funding, time and internal capacity for targeted skills development	• Develop leadership and mentorship capacities within the organization • Build workforce skills needed for current operational needs and 'prepare the future'
• De-risk and inform investment decisions around upskilling activities	Real-time LMI and trusted sources of information and advice to identify suitable, high-quality, targeted skills training	• Identify targeted opportunities for internal recruitment • Reduce risk of investing in employee development and inform staff upskilling opportunities
• Provide opportunity to reflect on career goals • Guide career transition decisions and identify opportunities to continue growing with current employer	Tools and processes to facilitate career conversations	• Take stock of staff's current skillsets • When appropriate, encourage staff to develop in alignment with organizational goals and foster retention • Identify potential for internal mobility and promotions

4. Conclusions and next steps

4.1 What we are learning?

Through interviews with mid-career workers and SME employers, this Needs Assessment identified the career development needs of both parties and the ways in which they converge.

We learned that **mid-career workers** were not satisfied with good pay and benefits alone; they also desired dynamic and fulfilling careers that provided meaning and purpose. Additionally, different mid-career worker archetypes had varying circumstances, aspirations and barriers to achieving their goals. These challenges were both psychological and practical—each group had a different sense of their ability to access skills, time, money and/or support from their employers. These challenges were often amplified for skilled immigrant workers—our systems do not adequately support newcomers hoping to transfer their skills, qualifications and experiences to the Canadian context, especially at the mid-career stage.

On the **SME employer** side, we learned that SMEs were particularly vulnerable to labour market and workforce disruptions, but they lacked the capacity to plan appropriately for the future. Concurrently, SMEs were struggling to recruit "the right people for the job," often due to skills shortages in the local labour market or challenges in identifying mid- to senior-level candidates who had unique sets of skills and experiences. While SMEs acknowledged the importance of workforce development and of supporting their employees in advancing their careers, they often had limited resources and/or capacities to support such activities proactively.

It is essential to note that skills development opportunities alone are not sufficient for mid-career workers and SME employers to build resilience. Nevertheless, our findings suggest a **timely opportunity for career development services that could be tailored to benefit both audiences**; they highlight common supports that could address both groups' needs and provide mutual benefits. Two-way engagement between employers and workers can help both parties better coordinate their workforce and career development interests. There is a need for both stakeholders to embrace career development mindsets and supports and to build capacities that would enable such conversations to happen in the workplace. In this process, CDPs can be strong allies for both mid-career workers and SME employers as they can help both groups foster more meaningful workplace interactions, ultimately leading to more fulfilling jobs and increased productivity.

4.2 Next steps

We pose several questions for further research and considerations:

- What are the types and intensities of career transition supports required by mid-career workers with different needs?
- Career development has traditionally centred jobseekers and workers as clients; what could a workforce development service model look like that was specifically designed for SME employers?
- Could a dual-client approach support mid-career workers and SME employers simultaneously?

Based on learnings from this Needs Assessment process, between May and November 2023, MITT and DC each engaged a portion of their worker and employer participants in a co-design process to develop career development service prototypes (DC worked with 42 workers; MITT worked with 29 workers and eight employers). This involved developing an initial service concept and pilot, where participants were invited to use the service and provide feedback throughout their engagement. It also required continuously iterating the service model based on these responses. At the completion of this co-design phase in November 2023, partners took stock of participants' feedback to refine their respective prototypes.

Between April and September 2024, our partners will continue to test and iterate their models with 20–40 additional worker participants per site and produce a model ready for larger-scale delivery (aligning with Stage 4 of the six-stage innovation cycle) by September 2024. During this period, MITT will also test the dual-client potential of the prototype with additional SMEs and their employees. Douglas College will engage employers in another Needs Assessment phase to inform an adequate service concept.

Throughout the entire Mid-career Transitions project, Blueprint will continue to collaborate with MITT and DC, working with their respective participants to generate and analyze evidence. A more detailed description of the co-design phase, as well as findings from the prototyping and testing phase, will be shared in a *Final Report*.

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