

Venture for Canada

Applying Design Thinking Frameworks to Program Co-Creation

An update on the Design Phase of VFC's Reskilling Retail Workers Project

JULY 2022



ventureforcanada



Future Skills
Centre

Centre des
Compétences futures

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

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Future Skills Centre or the Government of Canada.



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The Reskilling Retail Workers Project

The [Reskilling Displaced Retail Workers Project](#) is a project funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre. The project supports the design of a reskilling program focusing on racialized and Indigenous youth in Ontario.

In the first half of 2020, 1.3 million Canadian retail jobs were lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and retail was among the [top three sectors](#) with the largest drop in labour demand. It is also an industry where [21% of jobs](#) are at high risk of automation with few or no options to transition into lower-risk occupations without significant retraining, according to a 2019 [McKinsey study](#). In Canada, [gaps exist](#) in foundational skills development and training opportunities for youth looking to bridge their post-secondary education to work experience. The pandemic and automation have widened these gaps, and displacement factors disproportionately affect [women, Indigenous, and racialized communities](#), with data showing that the most vulnerable (core-aged women in low-wage jobs, marginalized populations and youth) were not only the [hardest hit](#) but are also expected to experience the longest recovery.

While the unemployment rate in Canada has gradually improved, at the time of publication of this report below 9%, the pandemic has caused dramatic changes in the career paths of Canadian workers, many of whom [do not have a job to return to](#). In response to the pandemic, many employers accelerated their use of automation and moved services online, eliminating jobs in the process. As the economic and social realities of the ongoing pandemic evolve, so has the labour market. VFC's approach to this project reflects this reality. We've

remained agile with responsive ways of working so that we can consider and utilize new and relevant data as it becomes available.

In a recent report, [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Responsive Career Pathways](#), The Future Skills Centre and Blueprint assert, "as we chart toward economic and workforce recovery, special attention will be needed to support at-risk workers in accessing training, upskilling opportunities and career transition guidance to prevent increasing workforce inequity."

The Reskilling Displaced Retail Workers (RRW) is a four-phase project designed by Una Louder and Juanita Lee-Garcia, the project team at Venture for Canada, supported by Scott Stirrett, Founder and CEO. The project models Blueprint's framework that aligns evidence generation to the [innovation cycle](#).

This is the third report in a series of four and outlines the project's third phase: Design. We provide insights and learnings from the co-creation process and design principles that the [Reskilling Retail Workers Project](#) has applied. In the previous reports, we provide insights into how we established a [Collaboration Framework](#) with a consortium of cross-sector leaders, [collected data for inclusive design](#), completed an extensive [literature review](#) and collected relevant Canadian data to validate our problem statement and guide these subsequent phases. Our hope is that this report serves a guide for projects looking to build re-skilling program designs through a lens of equity and inclusion.

-Juanita Lee-Garcia and Una Louder

RESKILLING DISPLACED RETAIL WORKERS.

A PARTNERSHIP CONSORTIUM PROJECT BY VENTURE FOR CANADA.

FURNDED BY THE FUTURE SKILLS CENTRE.

Key Metrics

18

COLLABORATORS

13

COMPANIES/
ORGANIZATIONS
REPRESENTED

6

DESIGN THINKING
HOURS

3

PROGRAM MODEL
PROTOTYPES
DESIGNED

57

KEY ASSUMPTIONS &
RISKS IDENTIFIED

5

ASSUMPTION
MAPPING HOURS

108

RDM CONCEPTS
GENERATED

Design Thinking & Rapid Decision Making

In the design phase of the project, we expected that brainstorming could surface a number of individual concepts that would then be used to build the program models that would be prototyped in the subsequent project phase. From experience, VFC is a strong proponent of design thinking methodology and leverages design thinking principles across its work so that emergent ideas surface and diverse thinking influences the product outcomes. Design thinking sessions allow you to achieve a varied, diverse and wide range of user-centred ideas. In our work, we also encourage project managers to engage internal experts, at each phase to facilitate, if possible, or in-kind and paid consultants externally if there is a lack of internal experience. If that is the case, we value external engagement as it creates better outcomes for the sessions and validates processes and findings.

Capturing the collective expertise of the project collaborators was an essential first step in the design phase. To enable an optimized and consistent process, we partnered with design thinking consultants, [AdaptiveX](#), to advise on the structure of the design phase and the sessions that would take place to create the best brainstorming environment for the project's intended outcomes.

Based on our unique project needs, the AdaptiveX team led a series of [Rapid Decision Making](#) Sprints. RDMs leverage principles

from Design Thinking, a [human-centred approach to innovation](#) that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success. As a [Design Sprint](#) derivative, this framework provides a **structured and focused decision-making process** that serves as a remarkably effective replacement for traditional brainstorms. RDM sprints aim to provide participants with a **platform for collaborative ideation** regarding design concepts and, secondly, to initiate rapid decision-making around the prioritization of the design concepts.

Three virtual sessions with **17 participants** from **13 unique organizations** for a total of **six hours of design thinking** proved sufficient for the amount of information needed to move forward. The team at AdaptiveX guided us to the ideal session structure and participant number per session to have productive discussions. We had over 100 ideas about our proposed program model by the third session. When suggestions became repetitive through reemerging key themes, we knew we had a sufficient volume of high-quality concepts to move forward with. While our list of ideas appeared to be exhaustive, we understand that there are perspectives we could have missed as the sessions were designed for rapid prioritization and decision-making over lengthy discussion and debate.

RDM Session Leaders

Hosted by the Project Manager, Una Louder and facilitated by AdaptiveX, RDM sessions also included Carlos Oliveira, Co-Founder and Principal Facilitator and Trainer and the following leaders (in alphabetical order on first name basis) who participated in the RDM session:

- [Ali Jaffer](#) | Chief Operating Officer, Generation
- [Anna Smith](#) | Training Director, Venture for Canada
- [Chi-Chi Egbo](#) | Director of Outcomes, Juno College of Technology
- [Colleen Tapen](#) | External Collaborator, Subject Matter Expert
- [Dana Tessier](#) | Director of Knowledge Management, Shopify
- [Gina Patterson](#) | Chief Programs Officer, Venture for Canada
- [Isabelle Cournoyer](#) | Senior Manager, Retail Talent Acquisition - Bell, Virgin & The Source
- [Joanna Mowat](#) | The Herridge Group
- [Juanita Lee-Garcia](#) | Director of Strategic Partnerships and Marketing, Venture for Canada
- [Kimberly Bowman](#) | Senior Projects Manager, Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship
- [Marcie Wenn](#) | Manager of Education, Retail Council of Canada
- [Midia Shikh Hassan](#) | Strategy Manager, Riipen
- [Shirley Leung](#) | Human Resources Administrator, Retail Council of Canada
- [Sonya Meloff](#) | Founding Partner, North America, Sales Talent Agency
- [Steve Higham](#) | Senior Lead, Research and Development, Business + Higher Education Roundtable
- [Tanya Chunk-Tiam-Fook](#) | Director of Research, Centre for Indigenous Innovation & Technology

Rapid Decision-Making Sessions: Objectives & Challenge Framing

During the project's research phase, we pivoted to design "intervention" programming rather than "impact" programming alone. Impact programming is a longer-term initiative that leverages and continues to build on the "intervention" models by collecting and analyzing new primary data and insights gained from prototyping, testing and iterating original design concepts. We were limited in our research and data generation phase. We did not have an inclusive and intersectional data set and therefore pivoted to intervention programming, which focuses on near-term market readiness and immediate impact for participants.

The primary objective of the RDM sessions was to identify key program model concepts, in other words, the high-level "ingredients" that go into creating a program with the goal of prototyping that program structure as part of the project's next phase.

The program concept brainstorming needed to develop intervention models leaned on the experience, knowledge, and insights of the project Steering Committee, subcommittees, external consultants, and session contributors through the design thinking process facilitated by AdaptiveX. We leveraged existing industry data and primary data collected through surveys and interviews to support concept generation.

A secondary objective was to create a unique environment for true co-creation and community building. The sessions were another opportunity for the project team to engage external stakeholders in the process, make connections amongst the participants through their common investment in the project, and host a space where everyone could have their voices heard and ideas valued. As part of the design process, active engagement in inclusive environments was a top priority.

Collaborators included a diverse group of people representing various communities, lived experiences, and interests in the outcomes of this project. Members of the Steering Committee, Venture for Canada non-project staff, community leaders, Steering Committee colleagues, and previous VFC consultants joined the discussions in one of the three virtual sessions. Due to budget constraints and the time limitations to complete this phase, we did not carry out an open call for participation. While this extra step requires vetting, we understand that open calls for participation provide transparency and access to the opportunity for anyone who will be directly involved with the program.

RAPID DECISION-MAKING SESSIONS: KEY ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL SESSIONS

Before the RDM sprints, session briefs and key insights documents were shared with participants to give context and adequate data to frame the challenge and consider solutions. These pre-read documents gave context to project progress and decisions, outlined parameters and constraints, highlighted the target participant, provided design concept examples, recommended best practices found through our research and proposed a problem statement.

Defining the problem, or “challenge framing,” is the first step in an RDM. Before brainstorming and idea generation can begin, a shared understanding of the challenge and design parameters is critical. Challenge framing invites participants to review the data, empathize, create a shared experience, align with other participants, and define a strategy for the future. To frame the challenge, we worked closely with AdaptiveX to develop a clear vision for the sessions through our problem statement:

*“How might we provide career development programs for displaced**

Indigenous, racialized, and equity-deserving youth with experience in retail that leads to career pathway opportunities in in-demand roles in the tech/startup sector or tech roles in the retail industry?”

***“displaced”:** folks who lost jobs, left jobs, or were otherwise displaced from stable work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This question is formatted to generate a wide range of ideas unrestrictedly while prioritizing our project’s outcomes. The question included the project’s target participant so that all ideas would consider the user/participant. Highly gendered and racialized industries like retail, food services, education, healthcare and social assistance saw the job loss of 1.5 million women, many of whom were women of colour. With our original project proposal and emerging evidence in mind, the target participants for the Rapid Decision Making Sprints were described as:

- **Racialized, Indigenous, women, and equity-deserving youth** (ages 18 - 29) in Ontario.
- Experience **working in retail**.
- Affected by **double disruption** during Covid-19 (been displaced during the pandemic or are at risk of displacement in the next six months.)

Before the session, we provided context on the program concepts, or high-level “ingredients,” that go into program design that we hoped to generate within the collaborator group. Design concepts are the ideas we intended to prototype, test, and refine in future phases of the project. We anticipated that two categories of program design concepts would likely surface:

1. Program Model Concepts:

Framework, model, and overall program design. Program delivery also falls into this category.

a) Example Concept: the size of the cohort (assuming it's a cohort-based program) is directly related to staff capacity to ensure their maximum 1:1 support per participant (assuming that 1:1 capacity is needed)

b) Example Concept: program activities build upon each other sequentially to support participants' ability to expand skills or gain new knowledge (bonus point for framework)

c) Example Concept: this program is built in partnership with community organizations that offer wraparound services for participants (bonus points if a specific wraparound service is included in the concept)

2. Program Content Concepts:

Focus on the content.

a) Example Concept: curriculum content is developed in partnership/consultation with Indigenous organizations and community to prioritize cultural relevance

b) Example Concept: program content pathways are customizable to individuals, ensuring the program meets people where they are addressing their goals

c) Example Concept: program prioritizes skills directly linked to in-demand roles and connects participants to job opportunities

1. Welcome



2. Alignment



3. Ideation

4. Prioritization



5. Concept Exploration



RAPID DECISION-MAKING SESSIONS: SESSION PROCESS & OUTCOMES

RDMS followed a format based on the suggestions from the team at AdaptiveX to ensure sufficient time to build trust, ask for clarity, and dive deep. Below are the five stages:

1. Welcome, intention setting, housekeeping, and icebreakers (20 minutes)

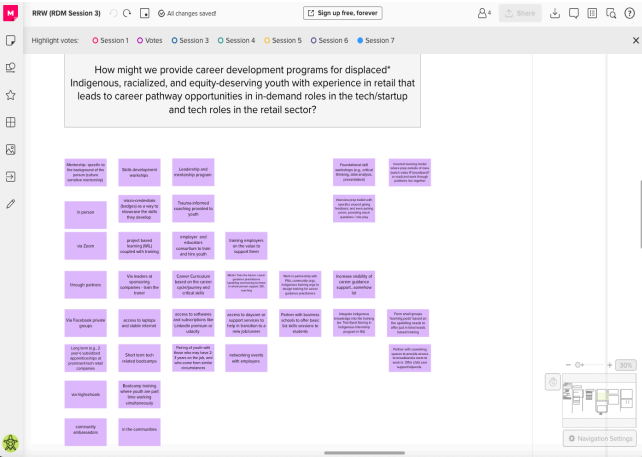
The session facilitators provided context, logistical and technological guidance and introduced the session and its goals. Participants had an opportunity to introduce themselves, meet other participants and share context for their interest and involvement in the project.

2. Time to review and confirm alignment around project research, problem statement, and session goals (15 minutes)

Participants had an opportunity to ask questions to gain more clarity or raise concerns before moving forward with the session.

3. A focus on (anonymous) ideation activities to unearth the best ideas from the group (20 minutes)

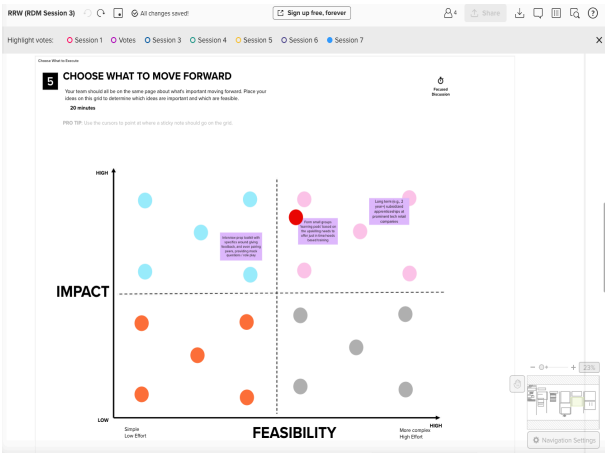
With the problem statement in mind, participants were asked to spend time anonymously posting ideas via virtual sticky notes to a shared whiteboard. The goal of the ideation was a high volume of ideas and rapid brainstorming.



An image from the third RDM session, demonstrating concept ideation.

4. Prioritization activities that allowed the group to collaboratively assess the concepts (20 minutes)

The ideas were categorized into concept themes and merged if duplicated. From here, participants could ask clarifying questions or give context to one of the ideas they pitched. After a short discussion, participants anonymously voted on the ideas they considered the strongest and the top-ranked concepts were moved forward for further discussion. The group then assessed the top three concepts on an impact/feasibility scale generated by anonymous voting.



An image from the third RDM session, determining impact and feasibility of individual concepts.

5. Concept exploration activity that allowed a deeper dive into the top three design concept ideas to be brought back to the broader project collaborator group (15 minutes)

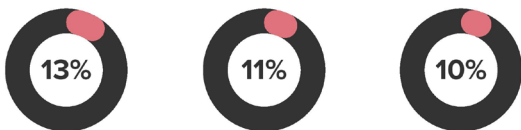
A deeper discussion on risks and assumptions for the top three concepts, as voted by participants. To generate a list of assumptions, we asked, “this idea will fail if, ” and to counter those assumptions and risks with solutions, we asked, “how might we de-risk this concept?”

Results:

Team collaboration during the sprints was excellent. We received positive feedback from participants about the tools (Mural platform screen shared via zoom) and techniques AdaptiveX used. Using technology that provided anonymity in ideation helped spark dialogue. Kimberly Bowman, Senior Projects Manager at Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship at the time of the project, noted, *“It’s hard to get online facilitation right – this session used digital collaboration tools to complement discussions seamlessly.”*

At the end of the RDM sessions, we had **108 total program design concepts** from three separate groups. The ideas ranged from concepts around program content to delivery methods, program models, and partnership opportunities. We recommend that for a project team of four people, 100-120 is sufficient.

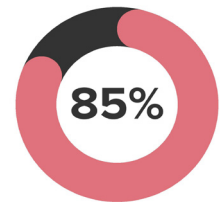
We categorized the main themes and found that:



- **13%** of the idea fit in the **“Career and Skills Counseling/Coaching (Pathways)”** theme;
- **11%** were in the **“Courses and Education”** theme;
- **10%** fell into the **“Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)”** theme;

We then assessed and categorized each concept into an ‘impact’ category (low, medium, high) based on our shared understanding of what it could achieve paired with the effort it would take to implement.

We noted that **85% of high-impact concepts were program model ideas (the “what”)**. The next phase of our design thinking sessions was to dig into the “how” of these concepts.



Much like the ideation, the assumptions and risks named in the sprint also ranged between the three groups. Some groups focused on the participant experience noting that low engagement could be a risk and a one-size-fits-all approach may not work for our target participant. Some groups named “data collection” and “accurate skills assessments” top risks, while others focused on the funding model and proving “ROI” as a consideration.

The *“how might we de-risk this?”* question invited participants to think about solutions to assumptions that surfaced and supported our planning and further understanding of the impact to effort assessment. Collaborators’ solutions and risk mitigation strategies have become part of our best practices recommendations, overall program model designs, or critical areas to prototype and test. It also demonstrated a critical need to explore assumptions and risk mitigation further before prototyping with potential participants.

Outcomes:

RDMs accelerated our project's design phase by providing the platform and forum for co-creation and collaborative ideation among cross-sector leaders. The sessions generated 108 unique design concepts assessed through an impact evaluation framework. The impact assessment resulted in developing two high-level program models, each consisting of six to eight concepts, explored further through assumptions mapping and prototyping. The process also generated a robust list of program design best practices.

“As a participant, you could see clearly how the session could link into important decisions. It felt like a thoughtfully designed session that made good use of people’s time – not simply consultation for consultation’s sake.”

- Kimberly Bowman, Senior Projects Manager, Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship

Impact Assessment Method:

To assess impact, all concepts were ranked on a scale of high impact/high effort, high impact/medium effort, or high impact/low effort and any concepts that did not have an impact ranking of “high” were removed from the process.

Following the impact assessment, we grouped concepts into “intervention” (high impact low effort) “intermediate” (high impact medium effort) and “impact” (high impact high effort) clusters. This technique has influenced subsequent phases of our project by determining three distinct program models to explore in prototyping and testing.

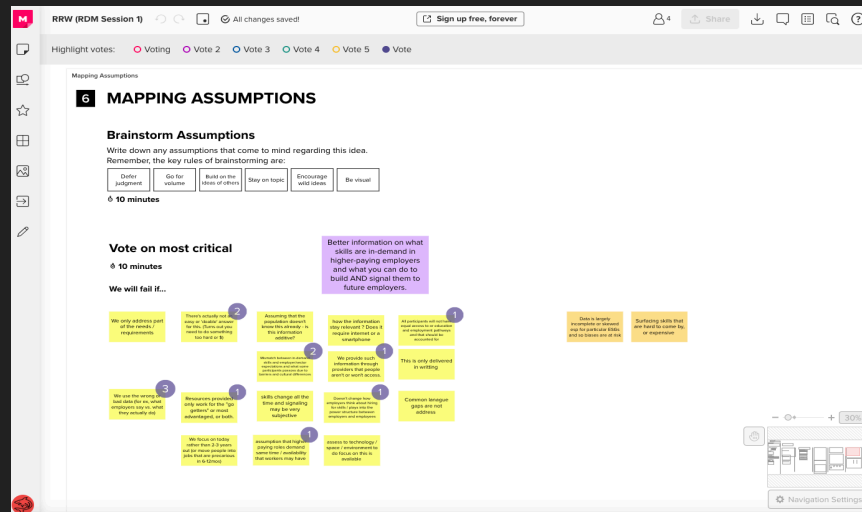
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
		Concept (high level “what”, not the “how”)		Main Theme		Secondary Theme		Type		Impact/Effort
1		Long term (e.g. 2 years) subsidised apprenticeships at prominent tech retail companies		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Career and Skills Counselling		Model		High impact high effort
2		paid work experience for the target pop.		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Employers		Model		High impact high effort
3		partner with businesses to develop skill building programs based on real jobs - RCI for both business and performer		Ecosystem Partnerships		Incentives and Benefits		Model		High impact high effort
4		Skills training with wrap around supports including the skills and counselling with a work placement at the end		Support Systems Accessibility Wkpa		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Model		High impact high effort
5		Leadership & Mentorship program - specific to the background of the person (culture sensitive mentorship)		Career and Skills Counselling/Coach		Co-Learning/Co-Creating		Model		High impact high effort
6		Engage employers in meaningful hiring and evaluation practices		Employers				Model		High impact high effort
7		Understand the value of the barriers to employment and mentorship having offsite ESG participants work with relevant orgs and experts to address barriers and create change		Employers				Model		High impact high effort
8		for other employes SUPPORT to manage programming SALES - convince target the work is worth it ACCESS see it try it/ believe you can be it PERMISSION you can do this role model/ 1st coaching support		Support Systems Accessibility Wkpa		Career and Skills Counselling		Model		High impact high effort
9		How to work for yourself - entrepreneurship		Entrepreneurship				Model		High impact high effort
10		creating flexibility but are relevant to each individual		Support Systems Accessibility Wkpa		Assessments (Skills & Needs)		Model		High impact high effort
11		need for multi intervention programs to tackle for successful career development		Career and Skills Counselling/Coach				Model		High impact high effort
12		Identifying the best partners		Ecosystem Partnerships				Model		High impact high effort
13		paid apprenticeship to learn craft - mentorship - job prep - aligned cover transport, childcare, equipment and minimum cost of living for six-months		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Support Systems Accessibility		Model		High impact high effort
14		Establish mentorships and apprentices		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Co-Learning/Co-Creating		Model		High impact high effort
15		On beyond online modules		Delivery Channels/Platforms		Courses and Education		Model		High impact high effort
16		Partner with colleges/universities to create “job-ready” programs to help these groups with job search		Ecosystem Partnerships		Career and Skills Counselling		Model		High impact high effort
17		Work with partners to connect directly with target populations		Ecosystem Partnerships				Model		High impact high effort
18		Partnership with employers to spend their own retail salaries and provide them with higher paid positions within the company (lower cost and risk in current company while doing apprenticeship)		Ecosystem Partnerships		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Model		High impact high effort
19		Consider how the employees need to change/transition		Employers		Career and Skills Counselling		Model		High impact high effort
20		Threaten internal coaching provided to youth		Support Systems Accessibility Wkpa		Career and Skills Counselling		Model		High impact high effort
21		Leadership and mentorship program		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Career and Skills Counselling		Model		High impact high effort
22		Inverted learning model where prep outside of class (watch video if broadband? or need) and work through problems live together		Courses and Education		Delivery Channels/Platforms		Model		High impact high effort
23		project based learning (WIL) created with training		Practical Hands-On Learning (WIL)		Courses and Education		Model		High impact high effort
24		Short term job-related bootcamps		Courses and Education		Delivery Channels/Platforms		Model		High impact high effort
25		Model Train the trainer career guidance practitioners								
26		Upskilling and training for them in wide person support, ODI, coaching		Courses and Education		Support Systems Accessibility		Model		High impact high effort
27		in the communities		Delivery Channels/Platforms				Model		High impact high effort
28		employer and educators consortium to train and hire youth		Employers		Ecosystem Partnerships		Model		High impact high effort
29										
30										

An image demonstrating the impact assessment of all concepts generated during the RDM Sprints.

Approaching program design without considering the short-term vs. long-term needs of participants may miss the mark on critical intervention opportunities, especially during a crisis (like Covid-19) where folks need support and services immediately.

Our focus remains on intervention and intermediate programming, an approach that acknowledges that building, launching, and executing a fully sustainable and high-impact program takes time, resources, multiple iterations, deep data collection, and evaluation.

Best Practices Hosting RDMs



An image from the third RDM session, demonstrating a deeper discussion on risks and assumptions for the top three concepts generated.

- The objectives of design thinking sessions will drive the outcomes. **Clearly define the goal of RDM sessions** to stay within the project's scope.
- If time and resources allow, **hold open calls for participation** in a true co-creation process.
- Expectations and ground rules for participation are based on **shared values and community guidelines** set by the core project group. While it may feel repetitive in the process, trust amongst the participants influences what they share. **Alignment is critical** to the success of the design.
- **Keep the concepts high-level** to allow for deeper discussion and assumptions mapping
- **Provide clarity** on what participants should be focusing on in the session (ex: we explicitly asked for concepts to be high-level vs specific curriculum ideas).
- **Provide high-quality pre-reads** regardless of participants' existing engagement with the materials before the session.

Assumptions Mapping & De-Risking Design

The Rapid Decision Making Sprints were generative from a program design perspective and also affirmed that cross-sector collaboration and co-creation are critical components to the success of the Reskilling Retail Workers Project. While our project focus shifted to intervention and intermediate programming, design thinking sessions support a mindset and framework that emphasize...

...solutions that are scalable, sustainable, and create immediate impact while also considering a systems change approach.

Following the Rapid Decision Making Sprints and concept analysis, we engaged AdaptiveX again to facilitate two Assumption Mapping sessions.

Objectives and Collaborators:

Programs stand a better chance of creating meaningful impact if they are well researched, tested, and continually evaluated. Before prototyping with potential participants, evidence shows that program prototypes need to be evaluated to identify critical risks and assumptions. In this process of design, we can develop proactive methods for effectively testing strategies for risk mitigation.

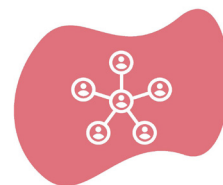
The goal of the Assumptions Mapping sessions was not to design a fully formed program but to focus on the testing aspect of program design. The two main goals for the sessions were to:

1. Explore the relationship between concepts in various models and consider how each program model may look in practice, through the lens of an end-user persona **(in short: walking through a hypothetical program and discussing how it might look in real life)**
2. Name risks and assumptions associated with program models, prioritize the risks and discuss strategies for testing **(in short: identifying and then de-risking most critical threats).**

We hosted **two** virtual sessions with **eight** participants from **six** unique organizations. Attendees included Steering Committee members, Venture for Canada staff, and external collaborators.



8 Participants



6 Organizations

Assumptions Mapping Participants

We hosted **two** virtual sessions with **eight** participants from **six** unique organizations. Attendees included Steering Committee members, Venture for Canada staff, and external collaborators.

- **Chi-Chi Egbo** | Director of Outcomes, Juno College of Technology
- **Gina Patterson** | Chief Programs Officer, Venture for Canada
- **Jennifer Basso** | Director, Operations and Strategic Partnerships at Akawe
- **Joanne Mowat** | The Herridge Group
- **Juanita Lee-Garcia** | Director of Strategic Partnerships and Marketing, Venture for Canada
- **Midia Shikh Hassan** | Strategy Manager, Riipen
- **Rhode Thomas** | Executive Director, Centre for Indigenous Innovation and Technology
- **Tanya Chunk-Tiam-Fook** | Director of Research, Centre for Indigenous Innovation and Technology

Assumptions Mapping Sessions: Session

Process & Outcomes

As part of our iterative project evaluation process, an important aspect of the Rapid Decision Making sessions was to debrief the exercise with key participants and the AdaptiveX team. Through follow-up conversations, we gathered valuable feedback that improved the effectiveness of the Assumptions Mapping sessions, particularly in the preparation stages and challenge framing. In order to better prepare for the sessions, we adjusted our briefing documents and worked collaboratively with participants to create user personas from which to imagine the programming experience.

Personas:

Leaning on Design Thinking principles, we worked with project collaborators to develop two unique user personas.

“Personifying the needs and requirements of potential program participants helped us better understand their desires, challenges, and expectations. They also helped to differentiate between types of users (avoid a one size fits all solution) and to prioritize context and empathy so our project team could better understand participants’ habits and realities while considering solutions.”

A persona is a fictionalized profile that represents a group of people from a common background, lived experience, interests, value systems or other traits, and needs to be built to ensure that the “how might we” statement of the challenge framing is relevant to the audience that the solution is meant to serve.

We considered aggregate, anonymous data to create the personas for the exercise and were mindful that the use of personas was not intended to identify or perpetuate stereotypes, but rather to create fictional profiles to help us consider different lenses for participants interacting with a program.

We recognize that personas are created from assumptions that are based upon past interactions and that they do not always account for the complex and intersectional realities of real people.



ASSUMPTIONS MAPPING SESSIONS: SESSION PROCESS & OUTCOMES

Personas:

Participant Persona: **Beth**

About: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paints and creates jewelry that she sells at PowWows and craft shows Worked in a clothing store for a North American brand that was acquired by a major competitor. All brand stores closed and online presence intensified, replacing in-person shopping Started as a customer service rep and eventually became store manager Has also worked in the bakery for an independent grocery chain and as a Reiki practitioner at a local spa. Not comfortable with or generally supportive of technology changes and advancements. Lives alone Deals with anxiety and depression. Continually works on mental health and feels ready for a new career that aligns with her skills, interests and personality 		
Age: 28 Retail Role: Unemployed Location: North of Toronto Pronouns: She/Her Education: Fine Arts Undergrad Race/Ethnicity: Identifies as Métis Other: 2SLGBTQ+ community	Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To save to buy a property To pay off debt she was left with by her divorced wife To learn about different roles and find a path she can pursue 	Needs/Expectations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start paying down +30K debt Full time employment with benefits. Preferably North of Toronto. Does not mind shift work or long hours
	Tasks do they do (or did they do) in their line of retail work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clothing and jewelry sales Help customers select items, answer questions, and cash them out. Makes product recommendations Create product displays for merchandise 	Strengths/Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design People person, making customers feel heard Building relationships with staff and customers Very comfortable with numbers and reports
	Pain Points (challenges/barriers) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hard to find work in Covid. Never had trouble finding work before this Sometimes struggles with confidence and not feeling good enough Worried that communication skills she used in her retail job won't translate in a new setting Doesn't know where to start or what she needs to do to secure a job in a new field 	Where do they get trusted infor/advice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friends Has heard from friends that networking is important when changing careers, but doesn't have a professional network yet. Her elder

Participant Persona: **Sam**

About: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moved to Canada at age 12 In a committed relationship has a 3-year old daughter Excelled in student government (model UN) in high school. Interested in Communications and supporting people who struggle with moving to Canada Works full-time in a family-operated hardware store owned by in-law's family (this is his only work experience) Super personable and makes everyone smile Interested in going back to school but concerned that it's too much of an investment. Has friends who went to school - some of them graduated with great jobs but others have come back with debt. Unsure if college/university is the right choice and can't risk taking time off work to go to school if it isn't going to pay off. 		
Age: 23 Retail Role: Sales Associate Location: London, ON Pronouns: He/Him Education: Highschool diploma. Completed one year of a two-year college diploma in Communications Race/Ethnicity: Nigerian Canadian	Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Earn income that provides a good life for his family Training/education to get a job with career growth potential Save up to buy a home without support of in-laws Rediscover sense of purpose in competitive, high-performing environment 	Needs/Expectations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits so his family will have a better health plan Interested in flexibility of remote work so he could be home with his family more but doesn't know where to start Values closeness to community (including workplace)
	Tasks do they do (or did they do) in their line of retail work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open and close the store Customer service Train and manage part-time staff Manages basic website and store Facebook page Fill in wherever needed 	Strengths/Skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quick math Managing customers and dealing with unhappy customers Sales enablement (upselling and deals etc) Strong written communication, especially in Marketing Resolving issues with basic tech (POS system).
	Pain Points (challenges/barriers) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wanted to pursue a career in business but didn't go to university because he and his girlfriend started a family Main income earner for family. In-laws support with child care so his partner can also work part-time (doesn't feel like this is a sustainable solutions). 	Where do they get trusted infor/advice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family and friends Talks infrequently with Aunt in Toronto who is successful in a tech role Friend who moved back from Toronto to afford a bigger place after graduating from Ryerson with a tech job. Works remote Social media via friends posts/stories. TikTok. Google.

Best Practices:

Much like the RDM sessions, prior to the Assumptions Mapping sessions, session briefs, personas, and program model documents were shared with participants. These pre-read documents gave context to project progress and the purpose of our sessions, outlined objectives and expectations, highlighted the personas, reiterated best practices, and outlined what participants could expect the day of the sessions. During the sessions, we presented two potential reskilling program models and participants identified critical risks that could jeopardize the impact of a program, and started ideation for risk mitigation through prototyping and testing.

“The program models we used were hypothetical, leaving room for discussion and adaptation from a delivery perspective and we aimed to dig into the concepts that need further testing and data to validate the major risks.”

The co-created design concepts from the RDM sessions made up the components (ingredients) of the program models we used in the Assumptions Mapping sessions. The program models we used were hypothetical, leaving room for discussion and adaptation from a delivery perspective and we aimed to dig into the concepts that need further testing and data to validate the major risks. We purposefully excluded concepts that had clear evidence to support them, rather we included them in our best practices resource. For developing and implementing this programming we lead with the assumption that program models in the Reskilling Retail Workers Project achieve best practices in the following categories and do not need to be tested:

Data/Research	Get feedback and input from target participant population on what they need	Build evidence base to support intervention	Regular evaluation: surveys, polls, and feedback forms are part of program delivery		
Communication / Admissions / Infrastructure	Clearly communicate benefits, expectations, accommodation, outcomes, and timelines of program	Ensure participants see themselves in the program (convey: this program is for you and you are welcome here)	Onboarding and application process ensure participants have opportunity to self-assess their skills and set goals/objectives for program outcomes that are unique to them	Ensure participants are able to actually do the program (consider cost, accessibility, and requirements for successful completion)	Share compelling proof (to target participants) as to why this program is worth it and what they can expect to gain from it
Partnerships / Ecosystem	Program delivery partners are organizations that reflect the communities and identities of participants	Consider how employers may need to change or evolve and engage	Identify the best partners for program content delivery and/or work placements or internships		
Program Elements	Provide support to navigate programming (role models, 1:1 coaching support, etc.)	Have attractive benefits that are relevant to youth	Programming reflects the diverse race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, language and special needs of the participants	Including social & emotional skills (human skills, "soft" skills etc.) - not just technical training	Training focused on developing entrepreneurial skills

A chart demonstrating best practices for program models across several categories that do not need to be tested for the Reskilling Retail Workers Project.

Session Process:

The project is exploring three different program models through a short-mid-long term implementation lens (intervention-intermediate-impact). Collaborators were encouraged to see these three models as phases of building a building:

- **Model #1** (short-term/intervention) is scaffolding. It's the first step to a longer-term structure and it isn't fully formed, but it's necessary for the next 2 phases.
- **Model #2** (mid-term/intermediate intervention) is the framework and structure of the building and it is built on top of the scaffolding. It's still not fully formed and there may need to be adjustments, but it's a more solid structure.
- **Model #3** (long-term/impact) is building the actual building. It is the ideal version of a sustainable high-impact program.

Early wins/learnings from model #1 inform the future sustainability of program models #2 and #3 and possibly provide a bridge for participants to move from one step to the next.

The Assumptions Mapping sessions explored models #1 (intervention) and #2 (intermediate). Participants worked through one program model per day so that they were stand-alone sessions and collaborators would attend one or both.

Assumptions Mapping Session Format

1. Welcome, intention setting, housekeeping, and icebreakers (15 mins)

Session facilitators provided context, logistical and technological guidance, and introduced the session and its goals. Participants had an opportunity to introduce themselves, meet other participants and share context for their interest and involvement in the project.

2. Time to review and confirm alignment around project research, problem statement, and session goals (10 mins)

Participants had an opportunity to ask questions to gain more clarity or raise concerns before moving forward with the session.

3. Alignment around the flow of the program model (35 mins)

Participants had a focused discussion on the program model through a participant's personal lens and revisions, updates, and co-created new best practices were incorporated.

4. Assumptions Mapping (35 mins)

Participants anonymously identified assumptions by answering the question, "we will fail if..." via virtual sticky notes on a shared whiteboard. Individual ideas were then categorized into themes and duplicated ideas were merged. From here, participants could ask clarifying questions or give context to one of the assumptions they surfaced. After a short discussion, participants prioritized the risks by voting anonymously. The "most risky" assumptions were moved forward for further discussion around mitigation and testing.

ASSUMPTIONS MAPPING SESSIONS: SESSION PROCESS & OUTCOMES

5. Exploration and de-risking (35 mins)

An opportunity for a deeper discussion on the three most risky assumptions, as voted by participants. Here we asked, “what do we believe to be true?”, “what question are we trying to answer?”, and “what ideas will help us mitigate the risk?” to generate solutions and ideas to test with program participants.

Outcomes:

The outcomes of the session directly informed prototyping with participants (interviews and focus groups) by identifying key considerations such as: what types of examples we should show; what questions do we need to ask; what information/feedback from future participants is critical to the success of the program?

The sessions generated **57 key assumptions and risks**. In analyzing the outcomes of the Assumptions Mapping sessions, we assessed every risk through two distinct evaluation categories. The first category addressed implementation concerns by considering aspects of desirability, feasibility, and viability, while the second assessed which phase of program delivery a risk was likely to occur (curriculum design, partnerships, enrollment, etc). **Ten key concepts were identified for further testing across the user journey (from awareness to evaluation).**

1. Target population is defined to address critical factors better
2. Programming is designed using good data (employers clearly know what jobs and skills they need going forward)
3. The program ensures employer partners are ready to receive talent from diverse experiences and works to develop those competencies with employers where possible

4. The program offers ‘wrap-around services’ beyond career/skills development
5. Coaches/mentors are the right fit & have an understanding of how to work with marginalized individuals
6. Delivery platform/format is effective and accessible
7. Program proactively addresses low engagement from participants
8. The program provides enough opportunities to apply and exercise learnings in a practical setting
9. Program proactively and effectively measures/ demonstrates what “ROI” is for employers
10. Clearly define measures of success and impact through program and participant outcomes

RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS

What might cause the program to fail?

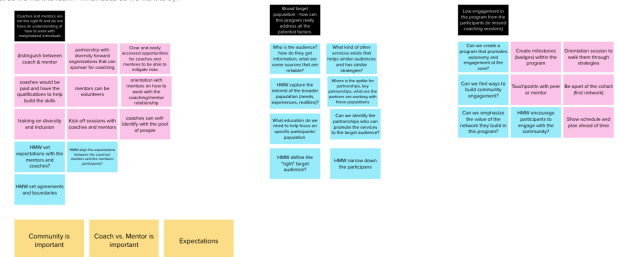
We will fail if...



An image from the Assumptions Mapping session, demonstrating participants’ response to “We will fail if...”

DISCUSS RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

What do we want to learn? What ideas do we want to try?



An image from the Assumptions Mapping session, demonstrating exploration and de-risking the three most risky assumptions, as voted by participants.

Next Steps: Prototyping & Consultation

Continuing to work with the consortium of collaborator organizations, the project intends to co-create pathways for Ontarian youth from racialized and/or Indigenous communities who work in and/or have been displaced from the retail sector.

These pathways focus on reskilling for sales-adjacent or customer success employment at Canadian technology companies or upskilling for IT/digital-focused jobs at Canadian retailers or e-commerce platforms.

The end goal of our 15-month project is to present a well-researched, co-created, and thoroughly tested MVP program for pilot funding and to share our processes and learnings to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on reskilling upskilling pathways and programs.

With over twenty years of experience in the design, development, delivery, and management of learning and performance interventions and specialization in eLearning, learning object design, and integrated performance support systems, [Joanne Mowat](#) has been a key collaborator and advisor to the Reskilling Retail Workers Project. Having participated in the research and design phases, Joanne's assessment of the project's approach is:

“Given:

- the need to quickly provide sustainable short and medium-term reskilling support to specific populations displaced from the retail sector due to COVID,
- the existing work already done by reputable groups and agencies with experience with these populations, and
- the high degree of difficulty and long timelines in collecting valid primary data

Venture for Canada's approach of:

- mining existing data using a meta-data analysis to identify themes, barriers, and best practices concerning both reskilling in general and reskilling for the affected populations
- seeking input from a representative sample of potential employers in employment growth industries
- driving collaborative program design with up to 17 groups and agencies directly involved in reskilling and who have direct knowledge of, and engagement with the affected populations, and
- planning to use prototyping and cognitive walkthroughs with target program users to validate assumptions, test program design, and identify any hidden barriers and opportunities

has an excellent chance of creating an effective, sustainable, defensible, program to support reskilling into employment growth sectors.”

NEXT STEPS: PROTOTYPING & CONSULTATION

We understand that [complex social challenges require systemic solutions that are grounded in the user's needs](#). Program designs fail when they don't center on participant needs and realities and when they have not been tested to gain insights and feedback from those they aim to support. The next steps for the project include prototyping and testing program models that have been co-created using the design concepts generated from RDM Sprints and de-risked through Assumptions Mapping sessions.

Through partnership and in consultation with [Immiducation](#), a career and education network of immigrants by immigrants, and an Indigenous youth employment specialist consultant and Native Canadian Centre Board of Director Member, we will test program models with input from the retail workers the program intended to serve, coaches and mentors with experience in similar programs, and Canadian employers hiring for in-demand technology jobs (e.g., sales- adjacent, IT, development, technical support).

Prototyping will uncover risks and gaps in mock environments, validate design elements, and identify the tools needed to implement the program, including technology, services, delivery, project tracking, and marketing and engagement tools.



A visual representation of the design-thinking process.

As we work toward a solution, we remain grounded in our philosophy that cross-sector leadership, [Collective Impact](#), and community-based participation are imperative to the project's success.

Get in Touch:

As the Reskilling Displaced Retail Workers Project moves through the prototyping and testing phases, community-based, participatory engagement remains a priority to the initiative's success. If you are a retailer, a tech company seeking ambitious talent, or a retail worker in Canada, we want to connect with you! Join our [recovery community](#) to participate in data collection, prototyping, or to stay up to date on the project's progress. If you are interested in partnership or collaboration, please contact [Una Lounder](#) or [Juanita Lee-Garcia](#).

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We are a consortium of non-Indigenous and Indigenous organizations. In this project, there are opportunities to learn and unlearn, and we will continue to have those conversations. This is a place for mistakes, learning, and understanding. Project collaborators respectfully acknowledge that the sacred lands upon which we operate, and the built communities and cities across the country, are the traditional treaty lands, homelands, and nunangat of the respective First Nations, Métis Nations, and Inuit. They are the long-time stewards of these lands. We work on the lands and regions still home to diverse Indigenous peoples and are grateful to have the opportunity to live and work on these lands. We continue to respect, honour and value friendship accords between Indigenous groups and communities that we work with and will continue to expand our agreements as treaty peoples.

Acknowledgements

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Resources

CITATIONS

Adaptive X.

[Rapid Decision Making](#)

Blueprint.

[Building Responsive Career Pathways in a Post-Pandemic World](#)

Blueprint.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Responsive Career Pathways.](#)

Collective Impact Forum.

[What Is Collective Impact](#)

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IDEO Design Thinking

[IDEO Design Thinking](#)

Immiducation Network

[Immiducation Network](#)

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