

**The Conference  
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# SES in the Workplace

Insights From Canadian Employers

Issue briefing | June 13, 2024

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The Future Skills Centre – Centre des Compétences futures (FSC-CCF) 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, and The Conference Board of Canada.

If you would like to learn more about this report and other skills research from FSC, visit us at [fsc-ccf.ca](http://fsc-ccf.ca) or contact [info@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:info@fsc-ccf.ca).

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# Key findings

- The demand for social and emotional skills (SES) is high and growing across Canada. The top five SES employers say they are looking for are communication, empathy, collaboration, listening, and emotional intelligence.
- Artificial intelligence, remote work, and an increased focus on workplace mental health are shaping the types of SES employers value and the contexts in which workers use these skills.
- Employers, especially small businesses, say they need clearer SES definitions and competencies.
- Many employers are looking for new ways to assess SES in interviews, but most are not using novel recruitment methods.
- Many employers acknowledge that gender, cultural background, neurodiversity, and other factors affect how candidates demonstrate their SES but need help accounting for these differences in recruitment and hiring.

# Recommendations

Employers that would like to better recruit for SES in hiring can implement the following practices:

- Attract candidates with in-demand skills by adopting clear SES definitions and assessment criteria in recruitment.
- Target talent with the appropriate skill set for success in the workplace by aligning job postings with desired skills.
- Evaluate candidates' SES during interviews with skills-based assessments such as role-playing and simulated job tasks rather than behavioural interview questions alone.
- Protect against biased SES assessments by using structured interviews, predefining assessment criteria, training hiring managers on diverse expressions of SES, offering diverse interview formats, and/or providing interview questions in advance.





# Hard-to-find soft skills

Social and emotional skills (SES) – also called soft, human, or people skills – are increasingly important for the future of work.<sup>1</sup> What types of SES are employers looking for? How do they assess these skills? What challenges are employers facing recruiting employees with strong SES?

In this project, we dug deeper into employers' perspectives. We interviewed over 70 human resources professionals nationwide who work in knowledge-based organizations of all sizes and across 14 different sectors. More detailed information about our methodology can be found in Appendix A.

We found that employers in knowledge-based organizations highly value social and emotional skills. They are looking for employees who have strong listening and communication skills and who are collaborative, empathetic, and emotionally intelligent. But employers face challenges effectively recruiting employees with strong SES. They often lack clear SES definitions and competencies and are looking for more innovative and inclusive ways to evaluate SES.

<sup>1</sup> Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional: Evolving Skills Needs in the 21st Century*; Conference Board of Canada, *Social and Emotional Skills Are Top of Mind Across Canada*.

# SES are key to workplace success

Employers are clear about the importance of SES in the workplace. Of the employers we spoke with, almost all told us that SES are equally or more important than technical skills to succeed in their organizations. Data from knowledge-based job postings also show an increased hiring demand for SES across the country. (See Chart 1.) See our [Data Briefing](#) for an analysis of SES in knowledge-based job postings across Canada. Our findings add to a growing body of research that underscores the importance of SES to the future of work.<sup>2</sup>

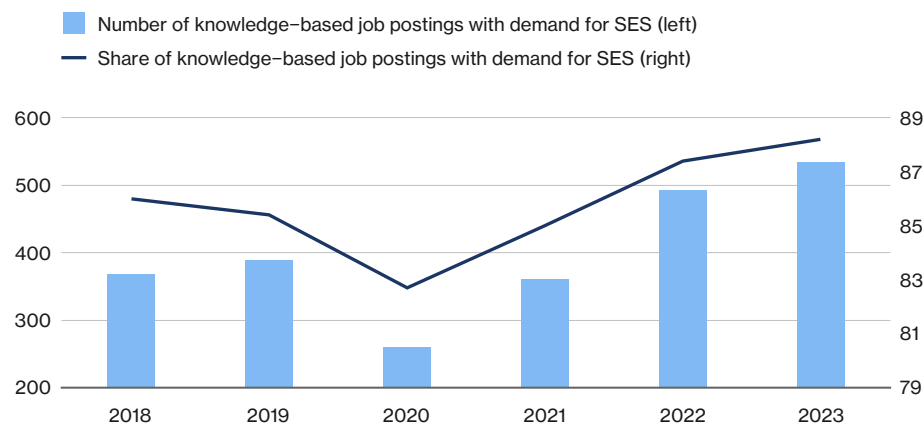
“People don’t get terminated because they lack the technical competence ... that can be taught for the most part. People get terminated because they can’t get along with others. They cannot communicate, right? So, SES is not just a ‘nice-to-have.’”

Employers we interviewed value SES because they view these skills as more challenging to develop in the workplace compared to technical skills. Employers pointed to platforms such as LinkedIn Learning, YouTube, Microsoft Learn, and others where they say employees can relatively easily and quickly hone their technical skills.

Although SES are teachable skills,<sup>3</sup> employers told us that developing employees’ SES is more difficult and time-consuming and may require ongoing coaching and mentorship. These factors make it harder for employers to develop SES on the job compared to technical skills.

**Chart 1**

Hiring demand for SES is growing across Canada  
(number of job postings, 000s; share of job postings, per cent)



Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

<sup>2</sup> Employment and Skills Development Canada, *Skills for Success*; Macpherson and Rizk, *Essential Skills for Learning and Working: Perspectives From Education and Employment Leaders Across Canada*; LinkedIn Talent Solutions, *Global Talent Trends: The Four Trends Transforming Your Workplace*; Muñiz, “Muddy Sensemaking”; Giammarco, Higham, and McKean, *The Future Is Social and Emotional: Evolving Skills Needs in the 21st Century*; Gorea and Fadila, *Searching for Strengths*; Sánchez Puerta, Valerio, and Bernal, *Taking Stock of Programs to Develop Socioemotional Skills*.

<sup>3</sup> Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, *Research Report to Support the Launch of Skills for Success: Structure, Evidence, and Recommendations*; Gorea, *Can Social and Emotional Skills Be Taught? An Analysis of Adult Training Programs*.

“Technical skills can be taught. Social [and] emotional, yeah, it can be taught to an extent, but I think I would take somebody with zero technical skills but strong social [and] emotional skills any day if I had the choice.”

We heard from employers that SES are indispensable for their organizations. Employees with strong SES help create a positive workplace culture, which helps employers attract and retain staff. It can also lead to productivity gains, ultimately driving businesses' bottom lines.

“If you have people that are able to interact and do so in an efficient way, it cuts down on a lot of the potentially lost productivity and damage that comes with toxic relationships in the workplace, and conflict in the workplace.... If people are able to work more collaboratively and cooperatively, that has real productivity gains.”

## Skills to succeed

These are the top five skills employers identified as key to success in their organizations:

- Communication
- Empathy
- Collaboration
- Listening
- Emotional intelligence

Most employers say the types of SES they need change across roles, depending on the nature of the work. For example, they told us that customer- or client-facing roles may require particularly strong communication and listening skills.<sup>4</sup>

Many employers also told us that senior roles require more highly developed SES. Senior positions tend to involve more collaborative work, responsibility, client interaction, and decision-making. These roles also often demand stronger communication, critical thinking, leadership, and interpersonal skills.

<sup>4</sup> Skills demand by occupation can be further quantified using labour market data from The Conference Board of Canada's OpportuNext database (<https://www.opportunext.ca>) and The Conference Board of Canada's Model of Occupations, Skills and Technology (MOST) (<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/future-skills-centre/tools/model-of-occupations-skills-and-technology-most/>).



# The future of work is shaping SES needs

Workplaces are changing. We found that increased remote work, technological change, and a growing focus on workplace mental health are affecting the skills and competencies employers value. While certain skills, like communication, are not new, employees are needing to apply their existing SES in new ways.

Conversations about employee well-being and work-life balance are becoming more prevalent, particularly given our experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. We heard that employers and employees alike are increasingly attuned to the interplay between personal well-being and professional performance. In response, many employers are increasingly looking for candidates who are empathetic and demonstrate strong emotional intelligence.

“There’s this real intertwining of the external and the internal, and the personal and the professional. That line is not always clear. I see a lot of people successfully holding space for others with a broader perspective of who an employee is when they come into the [workplace].”

The shift to remote and hybrid work has changed how we communicate and collaborate at work. Employers told us that it takes more effort to communicate well and clearly when you’re not co-located with your colleagues. In a virtual environment, active listening is more important, as social and non-verbal cues are harder to pick up than they are in in-person interactions.

Building connections can be more difficult in a virtual or hybrid environment, and this in turn can hamper creativity and innovation. What was once organic in an inperson environment must now be much more intentional.

“We’re missing ambient conversations. In-person you’re having the conversation in the lunchroom, in the hallway, that’s leading to problem-solving. You’re getting to have those casual conversations where there could be brilliant ideas coming out of those. When you’re speaking online, it’s more structured. I think we’re losing creativity in that respect.”

Many employers anticipate that the rise of generative AI and increased automation will change SES needs in the future or increase their overall importance. For example, changing technology may require employees to be more flexible and adaptable or have a growth mindset as businesses’ core activities change and as employees increasingly need to use AI in the workplace. Given the level and pace of technological change, leaders may need to be more empathetic to manage change effectively.

“I think [SES are] the only skills that are going to be necessary in the future. AI is disrupting everything, everywhere.... Our humanity is the only thing we’re going to be able to bring into the workplace in the future. And that’s the only thing that will actually be valued....”



# Employers are unclear on how to recruit for SES

Employers face challenges effectively communicating their expectations to candidates. Many are not using clear definitions, few are using novel methods to recruit for SES, and job postings are missing key skills that employers want.

Even though employers highly value SES, almost half told us they lacked clear definitions of these skills. This was particularly true for small businesses, 64 per cent of which reported that they did not have formal definitions of SES. When expectations aren't clearly articulated, there may be multiple interpretations of what skills are needed for a given role.

“We obviously talk about the skills and requirements and the educational requirements and designations that are required, but we don't articulate in a job description exactly the soft skills competencies.”

Some employers report that without SES definitions, it's difficult to effectively communicate their skills requirements to candidates. When we asked employers whether the way they were articulating SES to candidates was effective, the top challenge they identified was a lack of clear and consistent SES definitions.

Clearly articulating required skills can make the hiring process fairer and more effective. Instead of listing broad character traits, skills requirements should be “clear, specific, and behaviour-based.”<sup>5</sup>

5 Nicks, Davidson, and Krishnan-Barman, *A Guide to Inclusive Recruitment for Employers*.

“I hate when I see ‘excellent communication skills.’ What does that mean? So, I try to define it saying, ‘Ability to have moderately complex conversations with internal and external stakeholders.’”

Employers can help candidates better understand a given role by being precise about the key behaviours candidates should demonstrate.<sup>6</sup> Research shows that focusing on demonstrable behaviours also helps increase the number of applications from women and racialized individuals.<sup>7</sup>

“There is always a subjective component to the interview panel. And that's what we try to minimize by creating, again, a definition ... what exactly we are looking for and what's the level of the skill.”

We found that only a handful of employers changed their job postings or recruitment strategy to better attract people with the SES the organization was seeking. Those who prioritized SES over technical skills in job postings tried to provide more thorough descriptions of the SES they were seeking or tried to provide a glimpse into the role through videos or virtual reality experiences.

6 Nicks, Davidson, and Krishnan-Barman.

7 Nicks, Davidson, and Krishnan-Barman; Coffman, Collis, and Kulkarni, “Whether to Apply.”



# Need for innovative assessment strategies

Despite the growing importance of SES to employers, they told us they often struggle to assess SES during hiring. Nearly 70 per cent of hiring managers told us that they use behavioural questions to assess candidates' SES in interviews. However, many employers admit that interviews are not the best environment or format for assessing candidates' SES.

A full 40 per cent of employers we spoke with told us they need new tools or methods to evaluate SES. Some described interviews as an “artificial environment” where it is hard to gauge an interviewee's authentic self and difficult for candidates to be genuine. Others explained that because many interviews use standard questions, candidates may answer well but fail to translate that into actual job performance.

A key challenge for employers is how to define, measure, and assess SES in ways that are equitable and inclusive. Almost half of the employers we interviewed say they are integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles into their recruitment strategies. For example, employers told us they are using diverse interview panels, giving candidates interview questions in advance, requiring cultural competency, anti-bias, and/or anti-racism training, and developing specialized hiring programs. Still, around a third of employers told us their practices need to be improved. Many employers are not yet confident that they know how to fairly assess job seekers from a different cultural background or whose communication and social skills differ from those of neurotypical individuals.

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“Because [interview] questions have been around for so long ... people I feel like come in with their stories already. So, they already have a story ... they know how to hit the certain points.... I worry that we're not actually getting the people who can really solve those problems and have those skills.”

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“We’re often looking for [self-awareness] in a candidate.... And this is where I find this tricky. We do want to see these pieces present. But we also know that neurodiverse candidates can be successful in these positions in the absence of those skills.... There also has to be an understanding and space for the fact that not everyone who comes through the door is going to be able to demonstrate this specific skill set.”

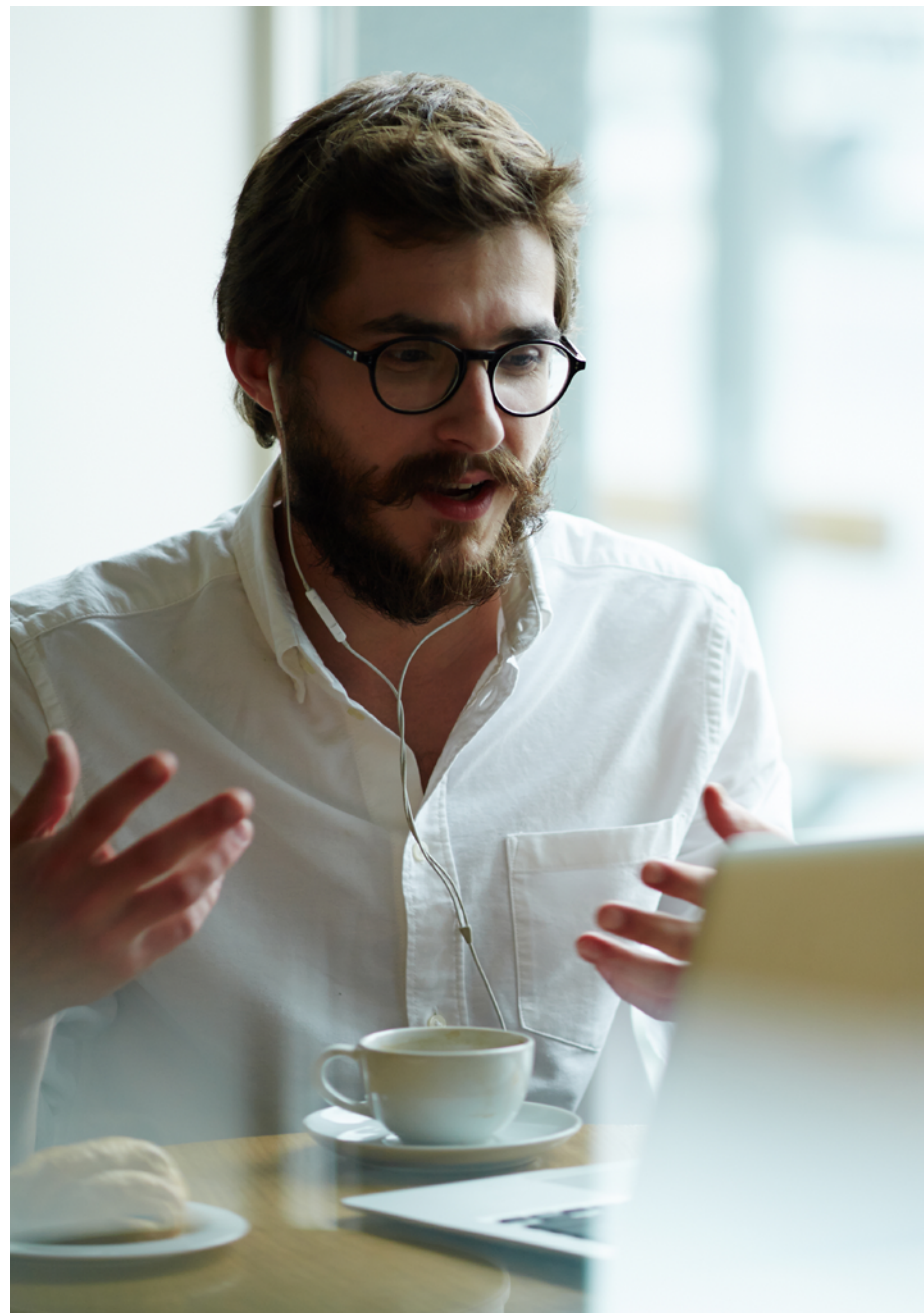
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“We have a Western lens in how we communicate and so you may think somebody that’s a bit more gregarious, outspoken—great, you’re able to connect with them. But somebody who is quieter, where the culture that they come from, they pay deference to a senior person.... You think, ‘Oh, they’re disengaged, they’re not listening.’ So we end up attaching meaning to those behaviours, but that’s, in fact, misaligned to what’s really going on.”

When we asked employers about the challenges they face assessing SES, nearly a third pointed to bias among hiring managers. Some employers told us that hiring managers need more training and education to conduct unbiased SES evaluations. Others need help creating inclusive interview questions and styles.

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“Sometimes, especially with unstructured interviews ... a lot of bias comes into play, right? You make snap judgments about someone, about where they’re from, what their background is, how they react ... so [it] becomes quite challenging for candidates to overcome.... And even with structured questions, if it’s not clear what skill you’re looking to assess, you might ask the question, get a response, and then evaluate something else in the answer.”





# Recommendations

To help employers meet the demand for socially and emotionally skilled employees, we offer the following recommendations:

## Employers should adopt clear SES definitions and assessment criteria

Nearly half of all employers, and two-thirds of small businesses, told us they lack clear SES definitions. Employers should use clear definitions and skill competencies<sup>8</sup> throughout the hiring process to help establish a shared understanding of job requirements and minimize ambiguity.<sup>9</sup>

## Employers should align job postings with desired skills

We heard from employers that SES are more important for some types of roles than others, and the specific SES required vary depending on the role. It's crucial that job postings highlight the most valued skills and strike the right balance between SES and technical abilities relevant to each position.

## Hiring managers should assess SES dynamically

Most employers told us they use behavioural interview questions to assess candidates' SES in interviews. But employers say they don't find traditional interview formats to be the most effective way to evaluate SES. Instead, consider using psychometric tools or measurements,<sup>10</sup> skill-based assessments such as work samples, role-playing scenarios, and simulated job tasks or activities. Determine how you will evaluate skills prior to the assessment, and test a range of skills.<sup>11</sup>

## Hiring managers should guard against bias when assessing SES

Culture, gender, neurodiversity, and other factors affect body language and the way people communicate and, in turn, how we assess other people's skills. To help mitigate bias in interviews, consider techniques such as these:

- Use structured interviews where candidates are asked a set of predefined questions.<sup>12</sup>
- Use diverse interview panels.<sup>13</sup>
- Train hiring managers on SES and the different ways they may be demonstrated.
- Focus on objective skill requirements in job postings, and avoid language like “good cultural fit.”<sup>14</sup>
- Offer alternative interview formats (e.g., inperson, virtual, phone, one-on-one, panel).<sup>15</sup>
- Provide interview questions in advance.<sup>16</sup>
- Review SES requirements for bias, such as masculine language, that may prevent candidates from applying.<sup>17</sup>

8 See the Government of Canada's Skills and Competencies Taxonomy for a useful starting point. (<https://noc.esdc.gc.ca/SkillsTaxonomy/TheTaxonomy>)

9 Government of Canada, *Skills for Success*; Gyarmati, David, Lane, and Murray, Competency Frameworks and Canada's Essential Skills; Conference Board of Canada, Employability Skills.

10 Conference Board of Canada, *The, Measuring Social and Emotional Skills*.

11 Davidson, Nicks, and Burd, *How to Use Skill-Based Assessment Tasks*.

12 Nicks, Davidson, and Krishnan-Barman, *A Guide to Inclusive Recruitment for Employers*; Atewologun, Cornish, and Tresh, *Unconscious Bias Training*.

13 Ontario Human Rights Commission, *Human Rights at Work*.

14 Nicks, Davidson, and Krishnan-Barman, *A Guide to Inclusive Recruitment for Employers*.

15 Bruyere, Chang, and Saleh, *Empowering Neurodiverse Populations for Employment through Inclusion AI and Innovation Science*.

16 Conference Board of Canada, *Brick by Brick*; Bruyere, Chang, and Saleh, *Empowering Neurodiverse Populations for Employment through Inclusion AI and Innovation Science*.

17 Gaucher, Friesen, and Kay, “Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality.”



## Appendix A

# Methodology

### Ethics

Since the project involves interviews only with professionals working in their field and covers topics related only to their work, ethics approval was not required. However, all interviewees gave informed consent and were guaranteed confidentiality.

### Interview recruitment

The research team sent email invitations to potential interviewees over a three-month period (May–July 2023). In total, 463 individuals were contacted for participation in the study. Of these, 73 participated. The response rate was 16 per cent.

To build the recruitment list, we generated contacts from The Conference Board of Canada's Council of Human Resources Executives and marketing mailing lists (129 contacts generated, of which 55 were contacted for participation in the study – only participants that met the inclusion criteria for participation in the study were contacted), internet searches (340 contacts generated, all of whom were contacted for participation in the study), and ChatGPT (142 potential contacts generated, of which 68 were contacted for participation in the study). ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence program developed by OpenAI. It generates human like text based on unique inputs (also known as “prompts”) generated by users. We used ChatGPT to help identify SMEs using the prompt “Provide a list of organizations in [province/territory] in the knowledge sector with fewer than 100 employees.” The research team reviewed each result ChatGPT generated to verify its accuracy and determine eligibility for participation in the research.

### Target interviews by subpopulation

We sought participants from knowledge-based organizations (see “Identifying knowledge-based organizations” below) across Canada. The target number of participants from each province was proportional to its population relative to the overall Canadian population. We sought at least 20 participants from small (1 to 99 employees), medium (100 to 499 employees), and large businesses (500+ employees).

We sought at least one participant from each of the following sectors:

- Information and cultural industries
- Finance and insurance
- Real estate and rental and leasing
- Professional, scientific and technical services
- Management of companies and enterprises
- Administrative and support, waste management and remediation services
- Educational services
- Healthcare and social assistance
- Arts, entertainment and recreation
- Public administration

See “Interview demographics” below for the final breakdown of participants by business size, location, and sector.

### Identifying knowledge-based organizations

Knowledge-based jobs are a cluster of occupations grouped based on underlying skill similarities. “K means” clustering is a quantitative methodology that can partition similar data points into sensible groups based on an array of descriptive variables that characterize each data point. In this case, k means clustering was used to identify each of the 500 NOC (National Occupation Classification) occupations based on their associated O\*NET skills set characteristics and then to group them into eight clusters, one of which is characterized as knowledge-based occupations. You can find a more detailed description of the k means methodology in The Conference Board of Canada's Issue Briefing *Beyond Blue and White Collar: A Skills-Based Approach to Canadian Job Groupings*.

Using this methodology, we identified the following types of knowledge-based organizations:

- Finance (e.g., financial and investment analysts)
- Economics (e.g., economists and economic policy researchers and analysts)
- Health (e.g., pharmaceutical)
- Education
- Research
- Communications (e.g., telecommunications)
- Business (e.g., management, advertising, marketing, public relations reps)
- Legal services (e.g., judges, lawyers, court officers, justices of the peace)
- Administrators (e.g., program and service officers, property administrators)
- Arts and culture (e.g., producers, directors, choreographers, editors, interior designers)

### Qualitative analysis

The research team conducted virtual interviews between May and August 2023. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, yielding 334 pages (166,844 words) of text.

Interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Coding themes were first developed based on the research questions and literature review, followed by an exploratory examination within interviews. Interrater reliability was measured using Kappa's statistic. The Kappa coefficient was 0.7. Themes were examined based on how frequently they were noted as well as the intensity of the observation.

In this report, we sometimes use aggregate terms such as “some” or “many” to discuss findings. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1**

Aggregate terms used in this briefing

Aggregate terms	Percentage of participants
Some / a few	4–29%
Many / several / commonly	3–40%
Almost half	41–49%
Half	50%
Most	51–70%
Almost all	71–99%

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

### Semi-structured interview questions

The interview guide was developed based on existing literature and in conjunction with the Research Advisory Board. (See “Acknowledgements.”) Sample interview questions include the following:

1. In your opinion, what are the most important social and emotional skills required for success at your organization?
2. Does your organization have a formal definition or way of articulating SES competencies in the hiring process?
3. Do you find that job seekers articulate their social and emotional skills adequately in the recruitment process?
4. Are there any barriers you face in adequately assessing these skills? Please describe.
5. Do you find that job seekers articulate their social and emotional skills adequately in the recruitment process? Please describe.

All interview participants completed an online questionnaire prior to their interview. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect the following demographic information from participants:

- Sector of employment
- Work arrangement (i.e., virtual, hybrid, or in person)
- Location of workforce

- Location of interviewee
- Organization size
- Length of time in current role
- Length of time in current organization
- Years of experience in similar role
- Gender identity
- Racial identity

Descriptive statistics were generated using MS Excel.  
(See “Interview demographics” below.)

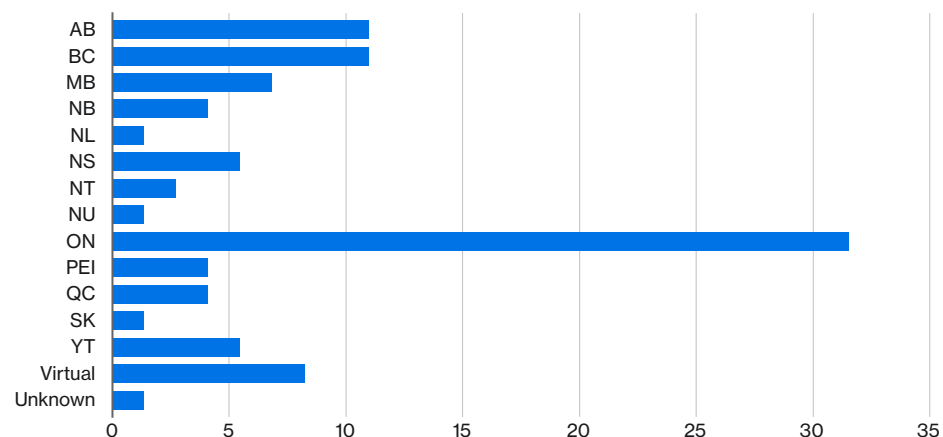
### Interview demographics

**Table 2**  
Participants by sector  
(number of participants; percentage of participants)

Sector	Number	Per cent
Public administration	11	15
Healthcare and social assistance	4	5
Professional, scientific and technical services	10	14
Other services (except public administration)	9	12
Finance and insurance	9	12
Arts, entertainment and recreation	6	8
Real estate and rental and leasing	3	4
Educational services	10	14
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting	1	1
Information and cultural industries	2	3
Management of companies and enterprises	2	3
Transportation and warehousing	2	3
Manufacturing	2	3
Utilities	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>100</b>

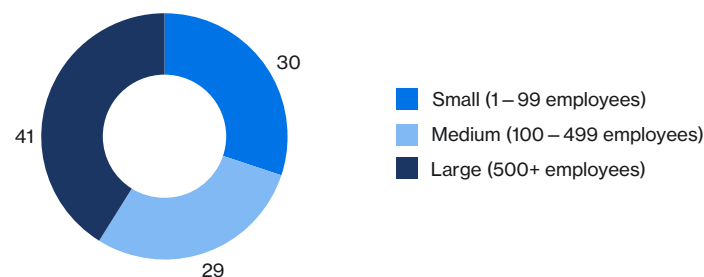
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

**Chart 2**  
Participants by province of work\*  
(percentage of participants)



\*n = 73, “Where is the majority of your workforce located?”  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

**Chart 3**  
Participants by business size\*  
(percentage of participants)



\*n = 73, “What is the size of your organization?”  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

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- Peter Leclaire, Vice President, Academic, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)
- Randy Lindsay, Chief Executive Officer, Futureworx
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## SES in the Workplace: Insights From Canadian Employers

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