

Venture for Canada

Collecting Data for Inclusive Design

A knowledge sharing report on the research phase of the Reskilling Retail Workers Project funded by the Future Skills Centre.



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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.



Index

Introduction	3
Research and Data Collection	5
Literature Review	5
Research for Inclusive Design	10
Data Availability	12
Continued Data Collection & Plan to Experiment	14
Data Collection	16
Exploring Hypotheses	20
What's Next?	21
Acknowledgements	23
Resources	24

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 2018 [McKinsey](#) study. In Canada, [gaps exist](#) in foundational skills development and training opportunities for youth looking to bridge their post-secondary to work transition. 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.

The Reskilling Displaced Retail Workers project has four phases designed by the team at Venture for Canada. The project models [Blueprint's](#) framework that aligns evidence generation to the [innovation cycle](#).

This report aims to surface the big questions that the Reskilling Retail Workers Project has encountered after establishing a [Collaboration Framework](#) with a consortium of cross-sector leaders. In the project's first phase, we asked, "how might we address the issue together?"

The Issue: There is a shortage of informed reskilling

programs for retail workers, and when a single sector attempts to launch a program, it is often a band-aid solution lacking long-term impact.

Our [first report](#) outlined a framework for collaboration. We understand that this complex problem requires a multi-sectoral approach. In that report we outline the integral role that co-creation plays into a long term sustainable solution to the reskilling problem. This report will provide insights into the project's research phase. Before designing a program structure or curriculum for a sustainable, participant-centered program, we assessed the ecosystem by completing an extensive literature review and collecting relevant Canadian data to validate our problem statement, test initial assumptions, and guide our subsequent phases.

We ask, "what information, resources, and data does an organization need to create sustainable programs for labour transitions and pathways?"

In this report, we provide:

- A short literature review with recommendations and best practices for reskilling programs;
- Our approach to inclusive design, [data collection](#) and the opportunities and challenges we've encountered;
- An opportunity to participate in our data collection;
- Key learnings from the collaborative process and next steps for the project.

We share insights into the challenges of implementing best practices and highlight the gaps in intersectional demographic and skills data that inform the reskilling space, particularly in the retail sector. Lastly, we share learnings from our successful project management pivot and how we are continually adapting the project to maximize both short and long-term impact.

RESKILLING DISPLACED RETAIL WORKERS.

A PARTNERSHIP CONSORTIUM PROJECT BY VENTURE FOR CANADA.

FURNDED BY THE FUTURE SKILLS CENTRE.

Canada has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reset the skills and employment agenda and build a foundation for a more innovative and inclusive post-pandemic economy and society.

As we move toward post-pandemic recovery, critical attention is needed to support at-risk workers in accessing training, upskilling opportunities and career transition guidance to prevent increasing workforce inequity.

Research and Data Collection

While COVID-19 has contributed to and accelerated worker displacement, reskilling, upskilling, and improving labour pathways was top of mind for corporations, government, non-profits, and the education sector pre-pandemic. Economists and policy analysts have carried out years-long research projects that provide insights and recommendations on moving forward with the shifting skills required for the future of work. Some recommendations focus on paradigm shifts in the way we perceive and hire skills. Others are more tactical in their approach, focusing on programs and short-term solutions that bridge the gap of what we think the career pathway is to today vs. what it will look like in two, and ten years.

Reports, like RBC's [Humans Wanted](#), written in 2018, Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship's [Job Pathway Playbook, 2021 Edition](#), and McKinsey's 2021 [Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work](#), define, quantify and catalog individual skills, then situate these skills in the labour market based on what the market deems most desirable or in-demand (commonly described as, 'foundational 'core' and 'interpersonal' skills), and then propose a plan for career transitions and promotions, offering a guide to bridge the gap between seemingly unconnected occupations.

To date, we have reviewed over 50 articles, studies, and reports on the topics of automation, job pathways, career transitions, skills assessment, and upskilling/reskilling. This literature is primarily from Canada with a handful of International citations from sources like the [World Economic Forum](#), McKinsey, and [OECD](#). The reports fit into two main categories, with the first group focusing on a specific or niche group, providing in-depth industry data and targeted insights while the second group approaches the

topics in broad strokes and is more generalized when sharing recommendations. This body of knowledge, particularly those focused on the Canadian market from 2018 onward, has provided the groundwork for assessing what makes career pathway programs successful.

Our hope is that the citations for this report may be the starting point for others interested in reskilling and upskilling. Through their recommendations, these resources have become the foundation for gathering evidence and informing our project's path. We have made the assumption that this body of knowledge will point us in the right direction when it comes to design elements including program structure, curriculum, outcomes, and best practices in impact measurement. With this base, the project hopes to pilot a viable program that can be adopted across sectors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review consists of over 50 resources, including reports, articles, and research papers. The resources cover topics including reskilling and upskilling program efficacy, labour market trends, youth employment, and the effects of technology adoption of jobs, employment, and education. This environmental scan helped us understand the market and the evolving landscape, explore and validate the project's solution hypothesis, learn about culturally relevant program design, and gain insight into skills assessments and skills gap perceptions.

We categorized the literature based on common themes that surfaced and in doing so, uncovered strong leads and unforeseen data gaps.

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Fourteen critical themes related to retraining programs surfaced across the review. The themes are program elements that showed the most viable path for success. They have been organized in order of most commonly cited, with the top five themes presenting in over 35% of the literature we analyzed.

We found that general reskilling programs have proven to be more successful if:

- Programs are [corporate-led](#) and/or collaborate with employment-sector businesses
- Programs are [demand-driven](#) (from both workers and employers) and are targeted at specific, strong demand positions (employers are actively hiring and sectors are growing)
- Programs include [‘soft’/‘foundational’/‘interpersonal’](#) skills along with literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills.
- Programs are practical (reduce barriers), [hands-on, and experiential](#), with continued coaching (get to try the jobs, accountability, and group work).
- Programs [increase access to training](#) by using multiple modes (in-person, online, etc.)
- Programs provide [culturally relevant](#) programming for various demographic groups
- Programs deliver [shorter, intensive programming](#) in addition to [mix work/study programs](#).

We also found that a successful reskilling program, designed specifically with the project’s prospective

participants at the forefront, should prioritize the following:

- a strong emphasis on **foundational** (‘soft’ skills and advanced cognitive skills), **literacy** (including digital literacy), and **numeracy** skills
- design **in collaboration** with employers, targeting **specific skills** for **real job opportunities** (demand-driven), providing **ROI for both the job seeker and the employer**
- the ability to be **flexible, scalable, and replicable** across audiences and sectors
- **experiential** and action-based (problem-solving) in design taking the best elements of **apprenticeship models** and combining them with **skills coaching, self-paced geographically and culturally neutral skill-building opportunities**, and individual support
- be **culturally relevant** for the target populations and **strongly supported by community leaders**
- result in **industry-recognized certification** to increase value and mobility of skills

A more in-depth example of success indicators is found in a report co-authored by the [Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business](#) which shared recommendations for Indigenous skills training programs to reach their fullest potential,

- 1) an ability to support youth through earlier intervention and pre-employment training;
- 2) programming for clients to upgrade essential skills before they reach pre-employment training; and
- 3) affordable, accessible childcare.



“Culturally relevant program design is vitally important for the program/research study to provide positive, long-term impact and value in the lives of participants, and their wider communities. Top down program development, dominant cultural or corporate paradigms, and institutional expectations for program outcomes can create biases and constraints that hinder the appropriateness and benefit of the program/research for BIPOC participants.

The ability to contribute meaning and transformative change within the lives and worlds of BIPOC participants, derives from the program being designed and delivered in ways that are attuned and responsive to their particular lived experiences, socio-cultural contexts, priorities and aspirations.

Engaging BIPOC expertise in a co-creation process from the initial stages, and throughout the program design cycle, ensures that the visioning, objectives, program elements and outcomes are not only culturally responsive, but that community-specific needs, priorities, cultural foundations and expertise are written into the DNA of the program.”

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The report goes on to say, “other studies have shown that the likelihood of success increases when training is culturally appropriate, engaging in land-based training and including wrap-around supports.”

Project Steering Committee participant, Tanya

Chung-Tiam-Fook, Director of Research, [Centre for Indigenous Innovation and Technology](#) illustrates the critical significance of culturally relevant program design, and representative co-creation saying,

“Culturally relevant program design is vitally important for the program/research study to provide positive, long-term impact and value in the lives of participants, and their wider communities. Top down program development, dominant cultural or corporate paradigms, and institutional expectations for program outcomes can create biases and constraints that hinder the appropriateness and benefit of the program/research for BIPOC participants. The ability to contribute meaning and transformative change within the lives and worlds of BIPOC participants, derives from the program being designed and delivered in ways that are attuned and responsive to their particular lived experiences, socio-cultural contexts, priorities and aspirations. Engaging BIPOC expertise in a co-creation process from the initial stages, and throughout the program design cycle, ensures that the visioning, objectives, program elements and outcomes are not only culturally responsive, but that community-specific needs, priorities, cultural foundations and expertise are written into the DNA of the program.”

While the literature review is a strong jumping-off point, we also recognize the goals of prioritizing holistic programming and access while also delivering on personalization and quality can be hard to reconcile and these seemingly conflicting priorities may be a challenge to deliver in practice. For example, designing a program that is demand-driven, hands-on, offered remotely and in-person, is self-paced yet individually supported, is scalable and replicable

across audiences, while being culturally relevant is certainly a tall order. The solutions to these complex challenges require nuance and interconnectedness and perhaps this is why reskilling programs have a [track record](#) of falling short and missing the mark on sustainable impact.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Responsive Career Pathways](#) point out that, “overlooking diversity-based nuances in data collection and analysis can undermine the experiences of equity-seeking groups in the workforce and perpetuate inequitable evidence generation.” With this in mind, and to mitigate the known risks while leveraging as many success indicators as possible, our focus is on designing programming for specific participant groups with specific outcomes. In order to better understand the needs of participant groups and to prioritize demand-driven programming, participant-focused data is critical to the design phase.

Though our literature review provided a foundation for the essential components of a successful program, it did not answer the critical questions we have about participant-centered inclusive design, program sustainability, and cross-sector application and adoption, especially when centering Indigenous and racialized youth. We understand this is a systems problem requiring a multifaceted solution, and while many resources outline broad recommendations, more specific learnings and calls to action tended to fall in the ‘what not to do’ category.

Essentially, what a holistic, sustainable, human-centered solution should look like is not covered in detail in the existing literature.

Research for Inclusive Design

When we launched this research phase, we intended to complete the literature review to understand the market and the evolving landscape, identify key themes and recommendations, and then compare those findings with existing sectoral data to kick-off the project's design phase. We anticipated and planned for intersectionality and nuanced evidence generated from that data in order to design a program pilot.

In addition to having an in-depth understanding of the problem and proposed best practices, we identified key indicators needed for program design. Some examples of these indicators include things like displacement rates for racialized and Indigenous retail workers, education levels of displaced retail workers in Canada and Ontario, and indicators relating to access and barriers to upskilling and reskilling opportunities among racialized and Indigenous populations.

Beyond reskilling and upskilling for employment outcomes, career services also come into play when addressing the challenge of workers who have been displaced. As outlined in 2021 report "Breaking Down Barriers to Career Development", The Future Skills Centre and Blueprint find that these supports must be [equitable by design](#), or else it will exacerbate inequality and hamper labour market productivity. The report goes on to say, "advancing equity during the transition to a knowledge-based economy means expanding access to lifelong learning. Career guidance systems in Canada need to adapt to break down barriers that prevent people from getting the support they need to find useful training, good jobs and meaningful work. Doing this means critically

examining both who is being shut out from career guidance and what barriers are preventing people from getting help."

Fundamentally, we're interested in data that ensures our program design will both understand and prioritize the unique needs of its future participants. Community-based participatory research is vital to the long-term success of the future program. The project is considering a number of factors and asking questions like these as we think about program design:

- What percentage of youth retail workers have formal education accreditation (ex. currently enrolled in post-secondary education full time or part-time, trade apprenticeship, or have another post-secondary accreditation)? Does this vary as we consider intersecting identities?
- What are some of the barriers that racialized youth retail workers may face when accessing programming?
- Are there significant wage gaps in the retail sector?
- What is the average wage of a young retail worker who decides to stay in retail as these jobs start to require more technical skills to support the automation of their systems and processes? Are workers provided with skills training? Is that training effective?
- What skills do retail workers have, according to their employers, job descriptions, and experience?
- What skills do retail workers identify as having?
- How are in-demand sector employers hiring for these skills? What are the indicators?
- What skills and experience do tech startups prioritize for various in-demand roles?

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- What are the skills gaps (and perceived skills gaps) between retail workers and sales, sales adjacent, or customer success roles in the tech and startup sectors?
- Is the most significant gap in career transition actually skills or is it “skills-language literacy?”
- What do potential program participants think is important and attractive in a job? What do potential program participants think is important and attractive in a skills training program?
- What sector bias and stigmatization is still prevalent in Canada today?
- What is/is not culturally relevant in program design? Who are the best people to design those elements?

Matthew McKean, the Chief R&D Officer at [Business + Higher Education Roundtable](#) and Reskilling Retail Workers Project Steering Committee member identifies the necessity of inclusive design in the research phase saying, “We live in a diverse country with distinct regions and populations, and research methodologies need to reflect that. Inclusion is more than a buzzword, and when we develop methodologies, we must consider how we’ll engage with equity-deserving groups, or whether we’re excluding anyone by virtue of how we’re designing surveys, planning focus groups or conducting interviews.” He goes on to say, “There are also ways of approaching communities and working in partnership with them to develop projects or respond to data gaps, and to determine how the results of a research project will be shared.”

Demonstrating ways of approaching data collection in partnership with community, and with Indigenous communities in particular, Tanya Chung-Tiam-Fook notes, “Community-based participatory research goes beyond research collected on community to that which is co-designed and collected for community, and with or by community. The research process

must be conducted in a decolonized, equitable and deeply collaborative way. Moreover, researchers and institutions would do well to cultivate an approach to research collection and knowledge co-creation that encourages reciprocal knowledge sharing and is guided by appropriate community experts and knowledge-keepers.”

Beyond the skills needed to make a successful transition into the technology sector or other high-growth industries, we also hope to learn about workers’ existing skills, experience, and education to identify what competencies and abilities are most transferable. Answers to these questions support our inclusive design approach to ensure community consideration, a program design that anticipates and accommodates the unique needs of participants, and commitment from the hiring sector that they will create equitable and inclusive opportunities for program participants.

“We live in a diverse country with distinct regions and populations, and research methodologies need to reflect that. Inclusion is more than a buzzword, and when we develop methodologies, we must consider how we’ll engage with equity-deserving groups, or whether we’re excluding anyone by virtue of how we’re designing surveys, planning focus groups or conducting interviews.”

- Matthew McKean
Chief R&D Officer, Business + Higher Education Roundtable

Data Availability

To date, there is very little research and evidence that focuses on retail workers, particularly the career progression of racialized and/or Indigenous youth in precarious retail roles. We have found that information including intersectional demographic data, pay, skills assessments, and job satisfaction is not readily available from retail employers in Canada.

We acknowledge that this data may be difficult for employers to gather for a variety of reasons. Asking about job satisfaction, skills level, pay, and demographic information that is unrelated to performance reviews has not been standard and historically, could lead to bias and conflict related to career acceleration, pay, and performance reviews, amongst other systemic issues.

[Breaking Down Barriers to Career Development](#) emphasizes the importance of data collection for inclusive design noting, “data collection and sensitive evaluation, or the lack thereof, are institutional barriers to people benefiting fully from career guidance.” The report also notes, as our project has found, “data collection, interoperability and sharing is an on-going challenge in Canadian employment services” and advising, “without better data collection and meaningful program evaluation, it is hard to know what works for these populations, and how to improve and tailor programs to be more effective.”

The recently published report, [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Responsive Career Pathways](#), also finds, “quantitative research on Canadian occupational segregation has traditionally focused on gendered segregation and has only recently begun to adopt racial and intersectional frameworks. This shift

presents an opportunity to explore more innovative and inclusive data collection, analysis and reporting approaches that are more reflective of the labour market realities faced by equity-seeking Canadians.”

While comprehensive data is critical to the design of a long-term, sustainable program, and sourcing baseline Canadian data about the intersectional make-up of retail workers and their skills is an existing challenge, we also acknowledge that immediate relief and intervention is needed for retail workers who have been displaced from their jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Reskilling Retail Workers Project has considered that [both short-term action and long term strategies](#) are needed to support the workforce in recovering and adapting to the current status and future of work.

“Quantitative research on Canadian occupational segregation has traditionally focused on gendered segregation and has only recently begun to adopt racial and intersectional frameworks. This shift presents an opportunity to explore more innovative and inclusive data collection, analysis and reporting approaches that are more reflective of the labour market realities faced by equity-seeking Canadians.”

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Responsive Career Pathways



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Continued Data Collection and a Plan to Experiment

The long-term problem we are looking at is the large-scale, sector-wise displacement that is caused by automation and has been accelerated by the pandemic. Today, “Canadians are deeply concerned that their jobs and the jobs of their family and friends are at risk of being lost to automation and [AI in the next five to twenty-five years](#). Citizens are worried that their job skills are not keeping up with the economy and are likewise substantially concerned about the long-term social mobility and economic inequality impacts of automation and AI.” Our long-term goal is to create a tested skills-based program framework that is piloted in one sector and can be adopted across other sectors.

In order to create a sustainable, replicable, and holistic program, more data and evidence generation is critical - specifically when it comes to understanding and designing for the unique needs of future participants. However, we recognize this level of data collection, analysis, and evidence generation is labour, resource, and time-intensive. Additionally, sustainability requires authentic buy-in and collective impact. Cross-sector collaboration and true co-creation are core components for this, but there is a significant time investment required in relationship building across sectors and organizations. Leaders have competing priorities, team members change roles or even jobs at times, and there is often limited opportunity to bring leaders together on a regular basis. We recognize that co-creation and collective impact takes time and ongoing connectedness and that a long-term research project may not yield data in time to support workers who have been displaced

from their jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic and need immediate support and relief.

According to a [Boston Consulting Group](#) report, “the rapid shifts to digitization and automation made by companies during COVID-19 have been intensifying both the skills gap and the skills mismatch.” We are acutely aware that the immediate need to support displaced workers is deeply intertwined with the skills for a future workforce. As we have noted, we can’t continue to address the labour skills gap through short-term band-aid solutions. With that in mind, the Reskilling Displaced Retail Workers Project has pivoted to adjust our project plan to maximize both short and long-term impact.

The project management framework established in the first phase of our project has allowed us to be dynamic and agile in the way we look at data collection and existing research for the subsequent phases of our project. To address the existing data gaps in the Canadian retail sector while still creating a program design that is aligned with the project’s original purpose and timelines, we have implemented a plan to extend the research phase to run parallel to the final two phases of the project (design and prototype) as we move forward.

INTERVENTION

- Immediate, short-term solution to the urgent problem (COVID displacement/recovery)
- Designed with existing industry data/insights
- Prioritizes program design and prototyping
- Launched as a pilot
- Opportunities for iteration to transition to impact programming

IMPACT

- Long-term, systems change approach
- Leverages and builds on intervention design
- Ongoing research and data collection
- Sustainable frameworks
- Impact strategy, measurement, management

This plan allows us to leverage our existing research, gain new information and validate program designs with a short-term focus, and use new, primary data at a later stage to inform two different design objectives and outcomes.

The first is to design for “intervention” programming. This programming focuses on near-term market readiness and immediate impact. This programming can be designed with existing industry data, and primary data collected through interviews, and will also lean on the experience, knowledge, and insights provided by the project Steering Committee, subcommittees, and external consultants and contributors. This program’s outcomes prioritize program concept design/prototyping and knowledge mobilization on processes, insights, and learnings while recognizing that it will require further testing and iterations to be scalable, fully sustainable, and wholly researched. Essentially, we plan to design and launch a program that addresses immediate participant needs, while continuing to collect data for future iterations and “impact” program design.

Designing for “impact” is a long-term initiative that will leverage and continue to build on the “intervention” project by collecting, and analyzing new primary data as well as insights gained from prototyping, testing, and iterating the original design concepts. This program’s outcomes prioritize ongoing research and data collection, values-aligned partnerships, and multi-year funding while adding to the growing body of knowledge on reskilling/upskilling program efficacy, culturally relevant data collection and design, and iteration/ evolution of programming for maximized sustainability and long-term impact.

Two design paths allow us to think and act in the short term to address disparities caused by the

COVID-19 pandemic while gaining the learnings and information needed to address industry gaps and the evolving landscape and building a program that addresses long-term concerns.

CONTINUED DATA COLLECTION

For informed, participant-focused design, we have stated that further data collection is critical. As part of our “impact” design path, we are conducting primary research about the retail sector, career-based skills, and job transitions.

The Ryerson University’s Research Ethics Board (REB) reviewed this project and confirmed that it is exempt (under Article 2.5 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research).

Our consortium is [innovating data collection processes](#) by prioritizing collaboration and equitable processes in data collection and analysis. Using an adapted version of the Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship’s (BII+E) [Job Pathway Playbook 2021](#) and [Sample Research Tools](#), and the FSC Common Outcomes Framework, which was developed in partnership with [Blueprint](#), we have designed and published three voluntary, anonymous surveys that will inform the design of a training program that impacts retail workers, retailers, and start-ups.

These surveys will be used to:

- Test assumptions and hypotheses about what a given group of workers is looking for in their career and their perception of work-related skills. For example, if earlier qualitative work prompted hypotheses about people’s retail-related skill sets (“many people who work in retail have strong communication skills”), this is an opportunity to test these with a larger group.

- Test assumptions and hypotheses about what hiring managers are looking for in candidates and their perception of work-related skills. For example, if earlier qualitative work prompted hypotheses about hiring managers' assessment of skills ("people who we hire for sales roles need to have strong communication skills") this is an opportunity to test these with a larger group.
- Gather input from a larger number of workers at a relatively low cost and at a distance.
- Explore differences within and between groups of people- -for example, to understand if the perceived skill sets, wages, or displacement rates of people differ based on demographic indicators.
- Explore gaps and perceived gaps in the skillsets of retail workers, and roles in sales or sales adjacent positions within retail and the tech/SME sector.

You can learn more about the surveys, or participate in our research project [HERE](#)

Who: 3 different [surveys](#). If one of these descriptions looks like you, please contribute to our data collection and complete the corresponding survey



Retail Workers

We'd love to hear from folks who work in retail (or with recent retail experience). Tell us about your skills & experiences!



Startup/Tech

We'd love to hear from People Operations / HR tech start employees about the skills and experience you look for in new hires.



Retailers

Do you work in HR, recruitment, or hiring in the retail sector? Tell us about the experiences and skills you look for when hiring!



“Some cultures value and demonstrate different skills in different ways. And if “SES” (social and emotional skills) just becomes a codeword for the skill sets that favour privileged populations, that will widen the gap, not close it. Skills articulation can also be a challenge, where a person has relevant skills and experiences but fails to communicate them to employers. In one example, a community worker recalled an Inuk candidate who had organized and led hunting trips, but who did not recognize or articulate that their experience demonstrated in-demand skills—like leadership, communication, and problem-solving— when presenting themselves to employers”

Exploring Hypotheses: Skills Language Literacy and Cross-Sector Collaboration

In our [first report](#), we introduced the concept of “**skills language literacy**.” When we refer to ‘skills language literacy’ we mean the ability to understand individual transferable skills in-depth and the competency of communicating the value of these skills to the entry sector. This [Conference Board of Canada](#) report illustrates some of the known challenges in skills identification and assessment stating, “consistently measuring skills is a challenging task that researchers have wrestled with for several decades. Early work on skills often conflated them with educational attainment, although there is consensus that the two are distinct ideas.”

The next phase of our project will explore skills language literacy from an experiential lens and consider some of the programming challenges and opportunities that may arise from this concept, particularly as it applies to racialized and Indigenous youth. The 2020 [Social and Emotional Skills Are Top of Mind Across Canada](#) report by the Conference Board of Canada illustrates the skills language literacy concept with a powerful example,

“Some cultures value and demonstrate different skills in different ways. And if “SES” (social and emotional skills) just becomes a codeword for the skill sets that favour privileged populations, that will widen the gap, not close it. Skills articulation can also be a challenge, where a person has relevant skills and experiences but fails to communicate them to employers. In one example, a community worker recalled an Inuk candidate who had organized and led hunting trips,

but who did not recognize or articulate that their experience demonstrated in-demand skills—like leadership, communication, and problem-solving—when presenting themselves to employers”

The Reskilling Retail Workers Project’s co-creation and cross-sectoral approaches are deliberate in the desire to dismantle systemic barriers for Indigenous and racialized youth to enter and be supported in roles at small businesses and startups. Something we are considering as a fundamental question in the project is: Do reskilling programs also fail because they assume that participants do not have the existing skills? Could these biases and assumptions be part of the disconnect?

Large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations. With this in mind, we will also explore the role that the Canadian retail sector, Indigenous businesses (which may be the most “[acutely impacted - and most at risk of displacement - by a digital revolution](#)”), the tech and startup ecosystems, and SME network (which accounts for a combined [61.2 percent of job growth](#) in Canada) have to play in solving this complex problem. Much like displaced workers, each sector has a unique set of individual challenges and needs and also has a critical role to play in informing, co-creating, and adopting a holistic solution.

According to [The Future Skills Centre](#), 40% of SMEs are identifying skills shortages as a major competitive challenge and, “SMEs also need to be more involved in discussions surrounding skills gaps and labour shortages, as well as in establishing the post-pandemic skills agenda.” Moreover, a 2020 report on [Indigenous skills training and jobs in Canada](#) calls on program and policymakers to prioritize a collaborative approach, imploring, “It is urgent that Indigenous businesses be involved in the formation of policies and programs that will mitigate against the impact of disruption through supporting business development and innovation, facilitating continued learning and re-assessing the link between occupations and skills to ensure Indigenous peoples will excel in the increasingly automated and digital workforces of the future.”



What's Next for The Reskilling Retail Works Project?

As data collection continues, our focus will turn to short-term program design processes and testing assumptions and hypotheses. In addition to the [surveys](#) we have designed to collect primary data, we will begin conducting qualitative research interviews that are focused on identifying and evaluating programming needs and exploring individual differences between participants' experiences and needs. These interviews will also explore skills gap assessments, job transitions, and hiring practices.

Looking ahead to the project's design phase, which will include a program sustainability framework as well as curriculum elements, the [Project Steering Committee](#) and design phase subcommittee contributors will participate in [design thinking](#) sessions to establish core program concepts for prototyping and testing.

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 success of the project.

- END -

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GET IN TOUCH

As the Reskilling Displaced Retail Workers Project moves through the research and data collection phase, community-based, participatory engagement remains a priority to the success of the initiative. If you are a retailer, a tech company seeking ambitious talent, or a retail worker in Canada, we want to connect with you! [Take our survey](#) and join our [recovery community](#) to participate in data collection, prototyping, or to stay up to date on the project's progress.

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 who are the long-time stewards of these lands. We work on the lands and regions that are still home to diverse Indigenous peoples and we 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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A group of young men are gathered in a well-lit room, possibly a workshop or classroom. They are wearing white t-shirts and blue lanyards. One man in the foreground is smiling and looking towards the camera. Another man in the background is wearing a yellow jacket. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

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