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The Heart of the Matter

Understanding Hiring Demand for Social and Emotional Skills

Issue briefing | June 13, 2024



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.

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Key findings

- The hiring demand for social and emotional skills (SES) took a hit during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic but rebounded quickly by 2021 and showed an even stronger growth trend from 2021 to 2023.
- People skills such as communication and teamwork are among the most sought-after SES by employers. Desirable personal qualities, such as leadership and adaptability, are also mentioned frequently in job postings for knowledge-based positions.
- Ontario has the largest demand for SES in knowledge workers, while Atlantic provinces saw the fastest increase in demand for over the last five years.
- Information and financial services are among the sectors that seek SES the most, followed by education and healthcare.
- Knowledge-based jobs that require post-secondary education have a higher demand for SES compared with those that require just a high school diploma.
- Job vacancies requiring college diplomas or apprenticeship programs of two to three years witnessed the largest increase in their demand for SES between 2018 and 2023.





Skills for the future

Social and emotional skills (SES) play a vital role in navigating the complexities of the modern workplace. As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to reshape industries and automate routine tasks, employers are recognizing the significance of fostering SES in the workforce.

SES, often referred to as “soft skills” or “21st-century skills,” are the abilities that help people understand and manage their own emotions, as well as recognize and influence the emotions of others. These skills are crucial for successful interpersonal interactions and for navigating various social contexts.¹

This data briefing summarizes the findings from the online job postings data provided by Vicinity Jobs, a real-time big data supplier for the Canadian labour market. Our data insights provide a snapshot of the hiring demand for SES and of employers’ expectations in the current job market.

By delving into the specific types of SES that are most sought after across provinces, industries, and occupation levels, we identify trends and patterns that provide a detailed overview of current employer demand in the SES landscape. These findings can guide post-secondary institutions (PSIs) in training future workers with the skills that meet labour demand in Canada.

¹ Filip De Fruyt, “Understanding and testing social-emotional skills,” in *AI and the Future of Skills*, Vol. 1: Capabilities and Assessments (Paris: Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, 2021). <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/d6e9d9e6-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/d6e9d9e6-en>.

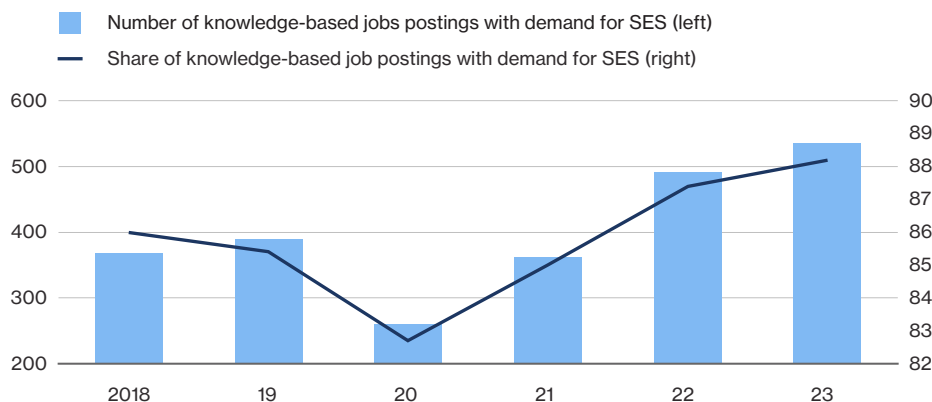
Reclaiming the human touch

SES regain pre-pandemic momentum

The hiring demand for SES declined during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic but quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2021. The number of knowledge-based job postings² with SES requirements increased by 36 per cent between 2021 and 2022. A similar pattern occurs with the relative demand for SES, considering the total number of online job postings. The percentage of knowledge jobs requiring SES dropped to 82.7 per cent in 2020 but rose to a new high of 88.2 per cent in 2023. (See Chart 1.)

Chart 1

Hiring demand for SES among knowledge-based jobs regains momentum
(number of job postings, 000s; share of job postings requiring SES, per cent)



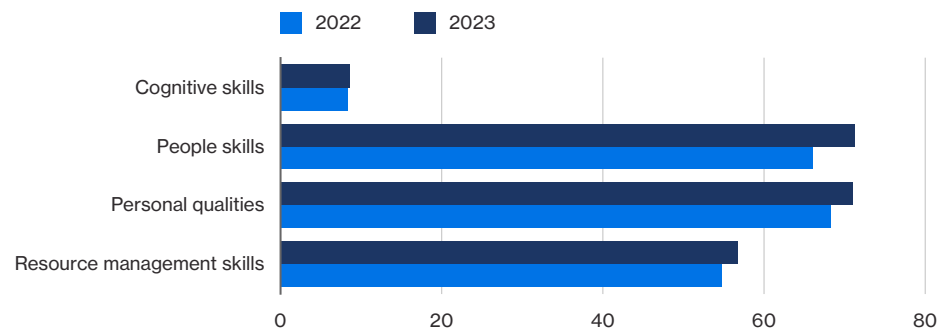
Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

² See Appendix: Methodology for definition of knowledge-based jobs.

As an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of competencies, SES are categorized into four broad key subgroups in the Vicinity Jobs database: people skills, personal qualities, resource management skills, and cognitive skills. Of these, the most sought-after attributes in the current hiring landscape are interpersonal skills and personal qualities. (See Chart 2.)

Chart 2

Connection and character—most demand is for people skills and personal qualities
(percentage of knowledge-based job postings requiring SES)



Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

People skills, which include communication and teamwork, are crucial for building and maintaining effective work relationships, enhancing collaboration, and ensuring a harmonious workplace environment. Desirable personal qualities, such as leadership ability and adaptability, are also valued by employers, as they enable individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern workplace, respond to challenges with agility, and contribute positively to organizational culture.

In 2023, 70.9 per cent of the knowledge-based job vacancies had requirements for personal qualities in their ideal candidates, and 71.3 per cent of the job postings for knowledge workers demanded people skills that allow them to work effectively with others. The high demand for these two skill sets has been consistent over 2018–23.

More specifically, the three SES that appear in the job postings for knowledge-based workers most frequently are communication, teamwork, and leadership skills. Almost half of the job postings require a certain level of communication skills in their candidates.



Around 40 per cent of the knowledge-based job postings mention that candidates must work well within teams. (See Chart 3.) Good teamwork and communication are essential for a smooth workflow, particularly in today's collaborative and increasingly hybrid and remote work environments. Other SES that are in high demand include leadership, planning and organizational skills, and flexibility. The pandemic and the evolution of AI have made employers realize the importance of the ability to plan, adapt, and respond quickly in the ever-changing world of work. Flexibility can equip knowledge workers to embrace new ideas and technologies.

Chart 3

Together toward success: top three SES are about collaboration
(percentage of knowledge-based job postings requiring SES, 2023)



Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

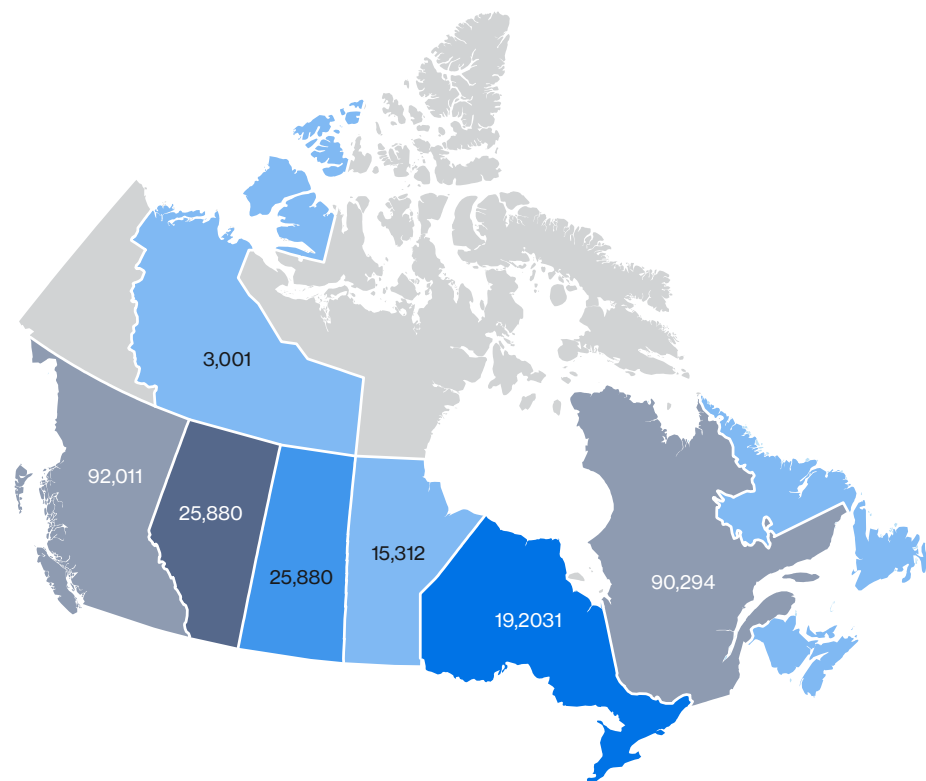
Rising tides: Demand grows fastest in Atlantic provinces

Ontario has the most sizable demand by volume for SES in knowledge workers. (See Exhibit 1.) Combined, British Columbia and Quebec—the next two runners-up—have almost the same amount of demand as Ontario. However, this is not the whole story. Ontario also has a much larger economy and more labour demand compared with other provinces and territories of Canada. When we examine the share of knowledge-based job postings with SES demand, the percentage of job vacancies labelling SES skills as job requirements is evenly distributed in 2023 across regions and ranges from 80 to 90 per cent. (See Chart 4.)

However, the geographical distribution of SES demand was not always this evenly spread. When we compare the average annual percentage point change in the share of job postings with SES requirements between 2018 and 2023, the largest growth in demand for SES was in the Atlantic provinces. (See Chart 4.) For example, in New Brunswick, only 68.6 per cent of job postings sought SES in their candidates in 2018. But, after five years, this share surged substantially to 91.1 per cent, an average annual increase of 5.5 percentage points. Newfoundland and Labrador also saw a progressive growth in the hiring demand for SES between 2018 and 2023.

Exhibit 1

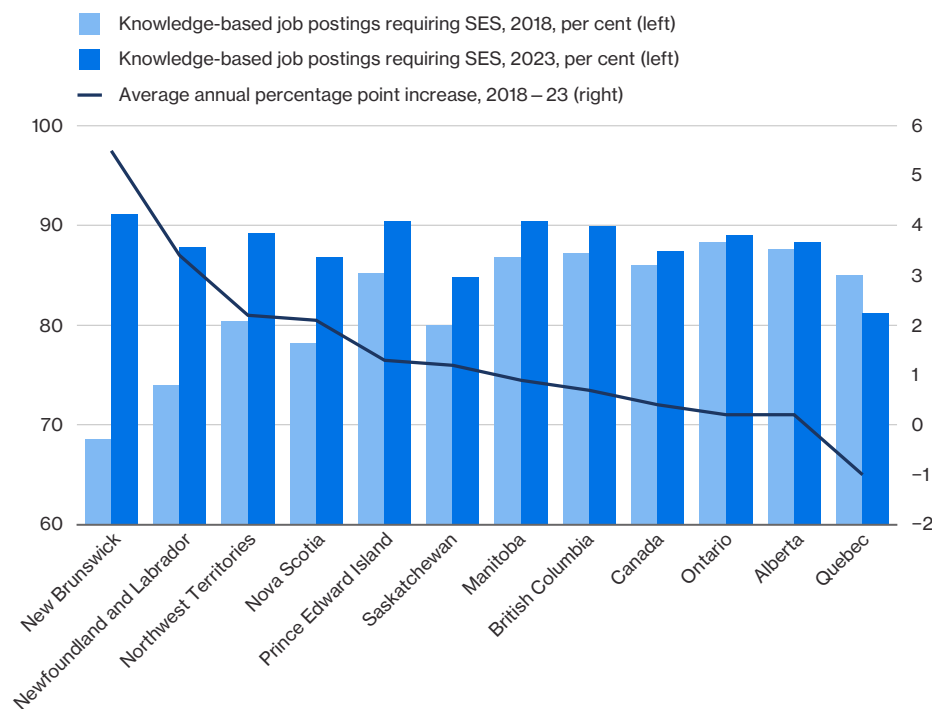
SES across Canada: Ontario had the most job postings needing SES (number of knowledge-based job postings requiring SES, 2023)



Note: Data for Yukon and Nunavut were not available from Vicinity Jobs.
Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

Chart 4**Atlantic provinces witness the fastest increase in demand for SES**

(share of job postings requiring SES, per cent; average annual increase, percentage point change)



Note: Data for Yukon and Nunavut were not available from Vicinity Jobs.

Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

One potential contributing factor is the economic shift toward services and tech in the Atlantic provinces. Under the guidance of the Atlantic Growth Strategy (AGS),³ launched in 2016, the region has undergone a notable economic transformation, with a marked shift from traditional industries like fishing and forestry to more service-oriented and technology-based industries. These sectors often place a higher value on SES such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. The region also has a strong tourism sector, especially in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, where there is a need for employees who excel in customer service and interpersonal communication.



3 Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, "Atlantic Growth Strategy."
<https://www.canada.ca/en/atlanctic-canada-opportunities/atlancticgrowth.html>.

Where numbers meet empathy

The information and financial services sectors stand out as those that demand SES the most, with 96.3 and 95.8 per cent of the knowledge-based job postings requiring SES in 2023, respectively. The Information sector, characterized by technological advancements and digital connectivity, needs professionals to navigate complex networks and collaborate effectively across diverse teams, which is why over 60 per cent of job postings called for teamwork skills. (See Chart 5.) SES such as teamwork and communication are crucial.

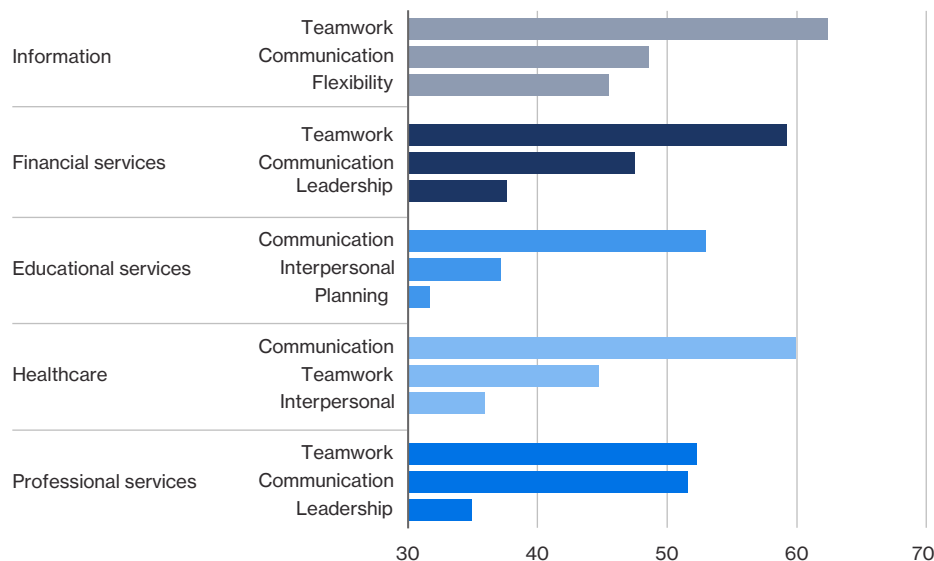
Flexibility is also a personal quality sought after by employers in this sector with 45.5 per cent of the knowledge-based job positions requiring flexibility in their ideal candidates. With constant changes in methods, tools, and practices, flexibility allows Information professionals to adapt, learn new skills, and remain effective in their roles.



Similarly, the financial services sector relies heavily on client relationships. Employers look for strong SES so employees will understand clients' needs, build rapport, and communicate financial information effectively. Additionally, with the rise of financial technology and automation, SES become increasingly valuable in distinguishing personalized services and providing the human touch that clients seek.

Chart 5

Top five sectors needing SES, and the most-demanded SES within each (knowledge-based job postings requiring SES, 2023, per cent)



Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

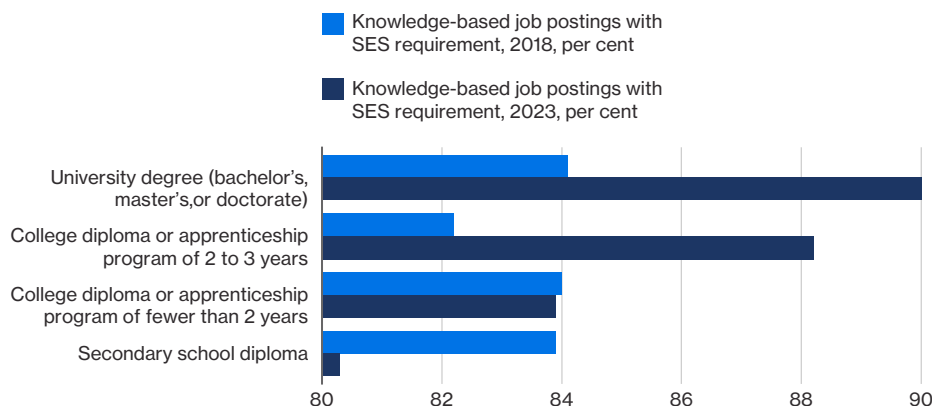
Degrees of emotional intelligence

SES demand is higher for jobs that need post-secondary education

The share of knowledge-based job postings looking for SES is higher in 2023 among jobs with post-secondary education (PSE) requirements than among those that require only high school diplomas. (See Chart 6.) Job postings with university degree requirements have the highest demand for SES, followed by jobs with college diploma requirements. In contrast, only 80.3 per cent of knowledge-based job postings that required just a high school diploma asked for SES in their job candidates in 2023.

Chart 6

Higher education requirements generally mean more demand for SES
(knowledge-based job postings that require SES, percentage)



Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

Jobs that required college diplomas or apprenticeship programs of two to three years witnessed the largest increase in SES demand, from 82.2 per cent of postings in 2018 to 88.2 per cent in 2023. This increase can potentially be attributed to several key factors.

The nature of these jobs often involves complex problem-solving, collaboration, and communication, qualities that are inherently linked to social-emotional competencies. For example, among jobs with this level of education, the occupation that has the highest demand for SES is licensed practical nurses, an occupation that requires empathy, teamwork, and communication skills. (See Table 1.) Also, the rapid advancement of technology and automation has led to more jobs at this education level that require human interaction and emotional intelligence. The job of retail sales supervisors showcases this, as it is an occupation that requires frequent customer interactions, team management, and adaptability to the changes in customer behaviour and market trends.

This highlights the significance of PSIs in cultivating talent that is equipped with SES. Universities are uniquely positioned to integrate social and emotional learning into a wide array of disciplines, fostering skills such as leadership, teamwork, and communication alongside academic knowledge. This holistic educational approach is essential for preparing graduates to meet the complex demands of modern workplaces, where interpersonal interactions and emotional intelligence are as crucial as technical expertise. Recent research by The Conference Board of Canada has shown that, while difficult, teaching SES is not impossible.⁴

⁴ Michelle Gorea and Katrina Campbell, *Can Social and Emotional Skills Be Taught? An Analysis of Adult Training Programs* (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2023). <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/can-social-and-emotional-skills-be-taught/>.

Similarly, colleges play a pivotal role in embedding SES learning within hands-on training. This integration ensures that graduates are not only proficient in their technical skills but are also adept at navigating the interpersonal aspects of the workplace, including communication, interpersonal skills, and adaptability. As industries increasingly recognize the value of SES in driving innovation, productivity, and employee well-being, the role of PSIs in shaping a workforce that is emotionally intelligent and socially skilled becomes more critical than ever. These institutions' ability to adapt curricula to include these competencies is a vital component in aligning education with the emerging needs of the labour market.

Table 1

Top three knowledge-based occupations in demand for SES, by level of education, 2023

University degree (bachelor's, master's, or doctorate)	Business system specialists Human resources professionals Information systems specialists
College diploma or apprenticeship program of 2 to 3 years	Licensed practical nurses Retail sales supervisors Computer and network operators
College diploma or apprenticeship program of fewer than 2 years	Administrative officers Nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates Legal administrative assistants

Sources: The Conference Board of Canada; Vicinity Jobs.

Essential skills

Social and emotional skills are no longer optional but essential demands of Canadian employers. Our analysis of job postings data across regions, industries, and occupational levels reveals a clear and growing demand for SES among knowledge-based jobs in Canada. The trends in hiring demand highlight the specific types of SES that are most sought after by employers, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and flexibility.

Canadian PSIs are uniquely positioned to impart social-emotional learning and training to the future labour force to equip them with these essential skills to meet this demand. By embedding SES into courses and training programs, they can better prepare graduates for a workplace that is demonstrating an increasing need for SES alongside technical skills for the job. This integration will facilitate a smoother transition for graduates into the workforce, reduce the skills gap, and support the growth and competitiveness of the Canadian economy.



Appendix

Methodology

Vicinity Jobs

We base our analysis on job postings data from Vicinity Jobs, a Canadian big data analytics company specializing in real-time tracking of regional and national labour market trends.¹ Using AI and natural language processing, it monitors online job postings and provides information on employer demand based on industry, occupation, skills, education requirements, etc. These job postings data effectively open a window for us to get a comprehensive look at the real-time hiring demand on the Canadian job market.

The focus of our analysis is on hiring demand for social and emotional skills. Based on the O*NET framework² and our recent research, SES are broadly defined as active listening, communication, leadership, cultural competence, resiliency, problem-solving, and collaboration. There is, however, no clear definition or taxonomy defining social-emotional skills in the Vicinity Jobs database. Instead, it takes a bottom-up approach, which is to simply tag and document from the job descriptions of online job postings the key words for the “soft/human/people skills” and then to summarize them into four categories. In other words, Vicinity Jobs provides data on what types of SES employers require of their ideal job candidates.

Table A1 summarizes the full list of skills that are labelled as SES. There is a total of 32 specific skills organized in four categories—cognitive skills, people skills, personal qualities, and resource management.

Table A1

Top three knowledge-based occupations in demand for SES, by level of education, 2023

Skill group	Skill subgroups (4)	Skills (32)
Social and emotional skills (SES)	Cognitive skills	Ability to learn Multi-tasking
	People skills	Advocacy skills Communication skills Conflict management skills Interpersonal skills Presentation skills Public speaking Team building Teamwork Writing
	Personal qualities	Attention to detail Critical thinking Decision-making Fast-paced setting Flexibility Goal-oriented Leadership Problem solving Results-oriented Retail-setting Self-starter / self-motivated Strategic thinking Troubleshooting Work under pressure
	Resource management	Organizational skills Planning Scheduling Supervisory skills Team management Time management Volunteer management

Source: Vicinity Jobs.

¹ Vicinity Jobs, “Who We Are,” <https://vicinityjobs.net>.

² O*NET, or the Occupational Information Network, is a U.S. database of occupational information, providing comprehensive details about various jobs and their requirements. <https://www.onetonline.org/>.

Identifying knowledge-based jobs

Knowledge-based jobs are a cluster of occupations that are grouped together 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 is 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. (See Table A2.) You can find a more detailed description of the k-means methodology in the Conference Board Issue Briefing *Beyond Blue and White Collar: A Skills-Based Approach to Canadian Job Groupings*.³

Table A2

Top three knowledge-based occupations in demand for SES, by level of education, 2023

National Occupational Classification (NOC)	Occupation title
00010	Legislators
00011	Senior government managers and officials
00012	Senior managers - financial, communications, and other business services
00013	Senior managers - health, education, social and community services organizations
00014	Senior managers - trade, broadcasting, and other services
00015	Senior managers - construction, transportation, production and utilities
10010	Financial managers
10011	Human resources managers
10012	Purchasing managers
10019	Other administrative services managers
10020	Insurance, real estate and financial brokerage managers
10021	Banking, credit and other investment managers

continued ...

3 Nachum Gabler, *Beyond Blue and White Collar: A Skills-Based Approach to Canadian Job Groupings* (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2022). https://www.conferenceboard.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/11758_issue-briefing_beyond-the-blue-and-white.pdf.

National Occupational Classification (NOC)	Occupation title
10022	Advertising, marketing and public relations managers
10029	Other business services managers
10030	Telecommunication carriers managers
30010	Managers in healthcare
40010	Government managers - health and social policy development and program administration
40011	Government managers - economic analysis, policy development, and program administration
40012	Government managers - education policy development and program administration
40019	Other managers in public administration
40020	Administrators - post-secondary education and vocational training
40021	School principals and administrators of elementary and secondary education
40030	Managers in social, community and correctional services
50010	Library, archive, museum and art gallery managers
50011	Managers - publishing, motion pictures, broadcasting, and performing arts
50012	Recreation, sports and fitness program, and service directors
60010	Corporate sales managers
60020	Retail and wholesale trade managers
60031	Accommodation service managers
70012	Facility operation and maintenance managers
70020	Managers in transportation
70021	Postal and courier services managers
11100	Financial auditors and accountants
11101	Financial and investment analysts
11102	Financial advisors
11103	Securities agents, investment dealers, and brokers
11109	Other financial officers
11200	Human resources professionals
11201	Professional occupations in business management consulting

continued ...

National Occupational Classification (NOC)	Occupation title
11202	Professional occupations in advertising, marketing, and public relations
21202	Urban and land use planners
31100	Specialists in clinical and laboratory medicine
31101	Specialists in surgery
31102	General practitioners and family physicians
31112	Audiologists and speech-language pathologists
31120	Pharmacists
31121	Dietitians and nutritionists
31200	Psychologists
31209	Other professional occupations in health diagnosing and treating
31301	Registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses
41100	Judges
41101	Lawyers and Quebec notaries
41200	University professors and lecturers
41220	Secondary school teachers
41221	Elementary school and kindergarten teachers
41300	Social workers
41301	Therapists in counselling and related specialized therapies
41302	Religious leaders
41321	Career development practitioners and career counsellors (except education)
41400	Natural and applied science policy researchers, consultants, and program officers
41401	Economists and economic policy researchers and analysts
41402	Business development officers and market researchers and analysts
41403	Social policy researchers, consultants, and program officers
41405	Education policy researchers, consultants, and program officers
41407	Program officers unique to government
41409	Other professional occupations in social science
51100	Librarians
51101	Conservators and curators

continued ...

National Occupational Classification (NOC)	Occupation title
51110	Editors
51120	Producers, directors, choreographers, and related occupations
12010	Supervisors, general office and administrative support workers
12011	Supervisors, finance and insurance office workers
12012	Supervisors, library, correspondence and related information workers
12102	Procurement and purchasing agents and officers
12103	Conference and event planners
42203	Instructors of persons with disabilities
52121	Interior designers and interior decorators
62010	Retail sales supervisors
62023	Customer and information services supervisors
62100	Technical sales specialists - wholesale trade
62101	Retail and wholesale buyers
72025	Supervisors, mail and message distribution occupations
13100	Administrative officers
13101	Property administrators
33102	Nurse aides, orderlies, and patient service associates
63101	Real estate agents and salespersons
14103	Court clerks and related court services occupations

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

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