



PROJECT INSIGHTS REPORT

Re-skilling displaced retail workers

[Inclusive Economy](#), [Pathways to Jobs](#)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The retail sector in Canada is increasingly embracing automation. While technological adoption bodes well for the sector, it puts at risk a number of young people, including racialized and Indigenous youth, who work in retail. The pandemic accelerated this impact, putting many out of work as the labour demand decreased during the lockdowns. The Re-skilling Displaced Retail Workers project sought to support the design of a re-skilling program for displaced Ontario retail workers, with a focus on racialized or Indigenous youth. The project had four phases: concept generation, research, design and prototyping.

The research team worked alongside multiple stakeholders and experts to generate ideas. Project leaders also conducted primary and secondary research to gather evidence on the needs and preferences of the target population, primarily racialized and Indigenous youth, and potential employers. This research and consultation were used to generate prototype program designs: (1) foundational skills training offered using a blended virtual/in-person format, and (2) paid work-integrated learning opportunities at innovative Canadian small and midsize enterprises (SMEs).

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PARTNERS

[Venture for Canada](#)

LOCATIONS

Ontario

INVESTMENT

\$283,927

Evaluation Report:
[Applying design thinking frameworks to program co-creation](#)

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[Collecting Data for Inclusive Design](#)

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While the project was not able to implement the prototyped programs during the time frame of the funding, the methods used to include relevant groups in co-creation holds lessons for others looking to design skills training programs, especially those targeting groups facing multiple barriers. However, the relevance of this project shifted somewhat, as the retail sector faces labour and skills shortages, a trend likely to become even more pressing given recent cuts to the numbers of international students and temporary foreign workers allowed to enter Canada.

KEY INSIGHT #1

Eighteen collaborators across 13 organizations participated in the design ideation workshops, generating 108 design concepts.

KEY INSIGHT #2

Inclusive co-creation is necessary to understand and dismantle the barriers faced by racialized and Indigenous youth.

KEY INSIGHT #3

Intersectional data on demographics, pay, skills and job satisfaction are not readily available from retail employers in Canada.

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The Issue

Retail is the largest private sector employer in Canada and plays an important role for young people, offering opportunities for entry-level experience and skills development. During the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of jobs in retail were lost. This had a disproportionate impact on racialized and Indigenous youth. Retail is also an industry where many jobs are at high risk of automation, and the pandemic spurred many employers to accelerate their use of automation, moving many services online and eliminating jobs in the process.

Retail workers, especially young retail workers, do not have many clear pathways to transition into lower-risk occupations, without significant retraining.

What We're Investigating

This project set out to design and prototype a holistic training program for Ontarian youth from racialized and/or Indigenous communities who work in and/or have been displaced from the retail sector. The goal of the project was to develop an entrepreneurial skills training program with two pathways for youth displaced from the retail industry: re-skilling for sales and customer-facing roles at Canadian startups; and up-skilling for IT/digital roles at small and medium businesses, including retailers and e-commerce startups.

The project had four phases:

- Phase 1: The project used a collaboration-impact framework to guide engagement with partners, including the Retail Council of Canada, Shopify Inc. and Riipen Inc. Partners participated in a co-creation process to better understand the needs and opportunities of the target population and employers.
- Phase 2: The project used community-based participatory research, including a literature review and data collection for an inclusive design, to identify program elements most likely to succeed. The project also conducted three surveys about the retail sector, career-based skills and job transitions to inform the design of the training programs.
- Phase 3: Project leads met with partners virtually and used design thinking and rapid decision making to help design the programs. We met with partners virtually and used design thinking and rapid decision making to help design the programs. These sessions fostered collaborative idea generation and helped prioritize design concepts. . Our group of 18 collaborators, who represented 13 organizations, generated 108 design concepts
- Phase 4: Through this project, we generated program prototypes for blended virtual/in-person foundational skills training programs for youth (18–30) with retail experience. The programs included paid work-integrated learning opportunities at innovative Canadian SMEs. The project partners sought feedback on these program prototypes in focus groups with the target participant population, potential employers and program coaches/mentors to gain deeper insights.

What We're Learning

Eighteen collaborators across 13 organizations generated 108 design concepts in the design ideation workshops. These sessions led to three blended virtual/in-person prototypes for foundational skills training programs for youth with retail experience, all of which would include paid work-integrated learning opportunities. Unfortunately, the program prototypes were not developed beyond the key concepts identified in the ideation workshop, and were not implemented with the target population.

True co-creation requires a commitment to values

This project relied extensively on a collaboration-impact framework to guide planning and engagement. Partnering with cross-sectoral leaders, the aim was to contribute evidence and insights about working together across sectors to improve job pathways. The project prioritized principles of co-creation, trust and authenticity to facilitate effective collaboration with the view that this approach was necessary for dismantling systemic barriers for Indigenous and racialized youth in accessing roles at small businesses and startups. This inclusive approach extended to the prototyping phase of the project, with feedback from retail workers, coaches, mentors and employers to uncover risks, validate design elements and identify the tools necessary for program implementation.

Collaboration takes time

Because we are committed to inclusive co-creation, this project took longer than anticipated and, ultimately, did not result in the design or implementation of intended programs. While the project emphasized the value of deliberate and deep engagement of sector partners, the fact that we were unable to implement the prototypes may frustrate participants, who expect to see an outcome from their input.


Disaggregated data on retail workers is currently lacking

During the research phase of the project, staff discovered a lack of research and data on retail workers, particularly related to the career progression of racialized and/or Indigenous youth in precarious retail roles. The project found that information about intersectional demographic data, pay, skills assessments and job satisfaction is not readily available from retail employers in Canada. This lack of foundational data compromises the ability to design effective training and skills interventions.



Why It Matters

According to the Retail Council of Canada, finding retail workers has never been more difficult. The sector increasingly needs workers with digital skills to facilitate the adoption of new technologies and the transformation of retail work. However, amidst these increasing skill requirements, the sector continues to be known for low wages and less-than-ideal working conditions. This echoes the findings of other research supported by the Future Skills Centre showing that Canadian employers in general are increasingly including skills requirements in job ads, but that this has not necessarily corresponded with increases in wages.



As Canada reduces the number of international students and temporary foreign workers, sectors that rely on these workers need to find new strategies to address labour shortages. While the intent of this project was to address job losses for specific groups of workers in retail that occurred during the pandemic due to lockdowns and accelerated technological adoption, the needs of the sector have shifted. Rather than finding pathways out of retail, the sector is strategizing about how to attract, train and retain the diverse workforce it needs.

The retail sector remains an important opportunity for young people and newcomers to Canada to gain experience and grow their skills. However, for the sector to address its labour and skills shortages, it will have to improve quality of work for front-line staff, building their skills to transform retail work, rather than eliminating roles altogether.

The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the ‘Dish With One Spoon Territory,’ where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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