

Project Insights Report

# Skills and strategies for quality hybrid work in Canada



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## Executive Summary

For employers in the knowledge economy, hybrid work remains critical not only to post-pandemic recovery but to the future of work.

With several years of hybrid work implementation, this project sought to document the hybrid work experiences of 20 Canadian executive-level leaders in workforce innovation and skills development and private sector organizations in culture, finance, tech, and professional services.

The experience of the executives corroborated trends seen more broadly, including the increasing use of hybrid work as part of a long-term workforce strategy and the need to engage employees to shape hybrid policies. The executives in this project also corroborated other research by highlighting the increasing desire from workers for flexibility while managing impacts on workplace culture, productivity and collaboration. Those interviewed also outlined the evolving skills demands for hybrid work for front-line staff and management.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for hybrid work. In response, employers seeking to attract and retain knowledge workers should seek to maximize job flexibility, both scheduling and location, while deliberately fostering engagement and skill development to support hybrid workers to excel.

### KEY INSIGHTS

1

Most successful hybrid approaches are informed by robust employee engagement, where diverse experience and expertise from employees at all levels is allowed to shape and reshape the workplace.

2

Many executives interviewed were concerned that the loss of daily in-person interaction was hampering their ability to foster a strong sense of shared culture, and that this was having a particularly concerning effect on new and younger workers.

3

When thoughtfully implemented, hybrid work can facilitate more equity for women, people with disabilities and rural or remote employees.

## ► The Issue

There is broad consensus that hybrid work is not a temporary legacy of the pandemic: it's here to stay. Today, one in ten Canadian workers has a hybrid work arrangement. Hybrid workers tend to be concentrated in the knowledge economy, in sectors like finance, technology, or communications.

Employers implementing hybrid work for the first time during the pandemic often did so ad hoc, with company schedules and team routines being adjusted as needs emerged, resulting in ongoing learning but also missteps—particularly in terms of their talent development strategy. [A survey](#) from October 2021 found that just one in five employees surveyed felt their employer was “well prepared” for the realities of hybrid work.

Most employers offering hybrid work now have a couple years of experience in implementing different approaches and gathering direct insights on the benefits and drawbacks of hybrid work for their firms.



## What We Investigated

This project sought to increase the AI knowledge and skills of professionals working in Canada, with the hThis project sought to document concerns, trends, and best practices for hybrid work arrangements for Canadian employers as they were emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the research questions guiding this project include:

- What was effective and ineffective for employers in Canada in relation to hybrid work?
- What skills and strategies Canada's employers felt they needed to cultivate for hybrid work environments?

To answer these questions, the project did an environmental scan of existing and promising strategies, pre- and post-COVID-19 onset, with a focus on hybrid strategies in Canadian and international contexts; and an analysis and synthesis of current discourse among skills and future of work stakeholder groups (private sector employers, skills and training practitioners, researchers, and knowledge economy employees).

The project used the results of the environmental scan to guide key informant interviews with 20 Canadian executive-level leaders in workforce innovation and skills development and private sector organizations across culture, finance, tech, and professional services. Stakeholders in executive-level leadership roles were prioritized given the influential roles they play in adopting equitable, inclusive COVID-19 recovery workplace policies and practices, and in responding to challenges of employee demands, and talent attraction, retention, and development.

## What We're Learning

### **Hybrid work as part of a long-term workforce strategy.**

Approaches to hybrid work are no longer about surviving and reacting but about responsive workforce strategy in a changing economy. While hybrid work may initially have been spontaneous and experimental, employers, particularly in culture, finance, tech, and professional services, are now more proactive. They're learning from experience and engaging their employees to create supportive approaches to developing their existing workforce.

**Successful hybrid approaches are informed by strong employee engagement.** Employers continue to experiment and adjust, but the most successful approaches are informed by robust employee engagement, where the perspectives of equity-deserving employees are valued, and where diverse experience and expertise from employees at all levels is allowed to shape and reshape the workplace.

**Balancing desire for flexibility with concerns about workplace culture, productivity and collaboration.** The leaders interviewed corroborated other research findings that flexible approaches to work help to attract and retain talent. For example, being able to tap into a more diverse and more geographically spread out talent pool offers organizations a competitive edge. But employers are concerned about the impact of hybrid work on equity-deserving employees, workplace culture, productivity, and team collaboration. Many employers are worried about how this disproportionately impacts young workers, especially recent graduates who have never worked in an in-person, professional workplace.

**Evolving skills demands for hybrid work.** Greater dependence on remote technologies requires specialized attention to learning and engagement and creates new demands for social and emotional skills, not only across teams but at supervisory levels. For managers, the leaders interviewed talked about skills to manage a remote team, including fostering and maintaining connections to facilitate collaboration. The leaders interviewed talked about the increased use of virtual learning management systems that included self-directed learning and professional development to support skill development to facilitate hybrid work.

**No one-size-fits-all approach for hybrid work.** Expectations and demands around hybrid work are rarely uniform, with some employees valuing different characteristics of their work than others. In hybrid workplaces, some employees may thrive in remote contexts, others in wholly in-person settings, while still others may prefer different combinations of both. As a result of this diversity of thought, for many employers, the process of bringing employees back into the workplace has proven even more complicated than sending them home. duce training at the cutting edge of technology while being appropriate for mid-career professionals.

## ★ Why It Matters

This project was meant to inform employers interested in the opportunities and challenges presented by hybrid work. While most of the data comes from employers in the knowledge economy, in sectors like finance, technology, or communications, the perspectives can inform a wider variety of organizations and leaders.

Other research, including other projects funded by the Future Skills Centre, confirms the increasing sense that job flexibility, both scheduling and location, is an increasingly common expectation for knowledge workers in Canada. This is especially true for knowledge workers from equity-deserving groups who experienced a host of benefits from working from home. Employers of knowledge workers looking to attract a more diverse workforce should consider how to maximize flexibility for its employees. At the same time, employers must balance the benefits of remote and hybrid work with deliberate efforts to foster equity, diversity and inclusion, develop and maintain connections and foster collaboration. As many employers in this project commented, successful hybrid work requires adapting existing skills and learning new ones.



### State of Skills: Quality of Work

As Canada navigates continuing labour shortages in critical areas of the economy, policymakers and employers are looking for more effective approaches to recruit and retain workers

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Given these skills demands, further research is required to understand different modes of delivering those skills, including finding balance between remote learning and on-the-job training, the limits of remote approaches to learning and development, whether synchronous (occurring in real-time) or asynchronous (self-directed, occurring at times convenient for the learner) and how that ratio varies among employee levels and across sectors, particularly in roles requiring employees to demonstrate specific, applied technical skills.

This project matters because decision-makers at every level should be aware of the pressing need to upskill workers in AI across the labour market. While individual workers need to take some responsibility for their own upskilling, employers stand to benefit from these skills and need to invest more in training for current and future employees. Policymakers should be looking for ways to incentivize employers to invest in training in AI for their employees, while also supporting training organizations to continue to develop programming to meet these needs.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

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