

Thriving Workplaces

Needs Assessment Report

June 2024

Blueprint

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.



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About the Future Skills Centre

The [Future Skills Centre](#) (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and are funded by the [Government of Canada's Future Skills Program](#).

About Blueprint

[Blueprint](#) was founded on the simple idea that evidence is a powerful tool for change. We work with policymakers and practitioners to create and use evidence to solve complex policy and program challenges. Our vision is a social policy ecosystem where evidence is used to improve lives, build better systems and policies and drive social change.

Our team brings together a multidisciplinary group of professionals with diverse capabilities in policy research, data analysis, design, evaluation, implementation and knowledge mobilization.

As a consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to collaboratively generate and use evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges.

Preface

More and more Canadians are changing jobs or industries throughout their working lives. They're doing so as a matter of choice—as a means of achieving dynamic and fulfilling careers—as well as in reaction to seismic shifts in the labour market: from increased automation to the rise of the gig economy, from the pandemic to climate change. To thrive in this landscape, many workers must reinvent themselves in their existing sector or pivot to new opportunities in emerging industries. They must be ready to **upskill, reskill** and **transition to new careers** as needed. But to achieve such agility, we must fundamentally rethink our traditional notions of work and learning.

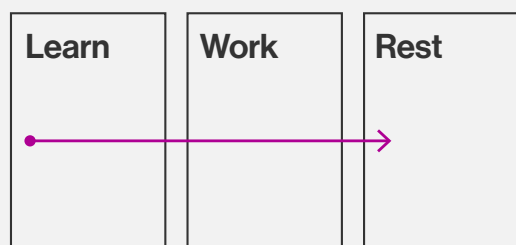
Canada's **learning ecosystem** is based on a **linear model**: one where people learn through our education system, earn through participation in the labour market, then rest through retirement. Supporting this “**learn-work-rest**” **lifecycle** are two pillars: a public education system that provides knowledge and skills before individuals begin their careers and a publicly funded employment service that helps unemployed people quickly re-enter the labour market.

In today's rapidly changing economy, however, a linear path of learning is no longer tenable. Today, individuals seeking to upgrade their skills, make meaningful career transitions and keep pace with the changing nature of work must embrace the roles of both worker and learner simultaneously. In other words, they must engage in a **continuous cycle of skill development throughout their working lives**. Likewise, employment services designed to help unemployed adults rapidly find work represent a “**fail first**” **approach**—and leave a glaring gap for those seeking to **upskill and reskill while remaining employed**.

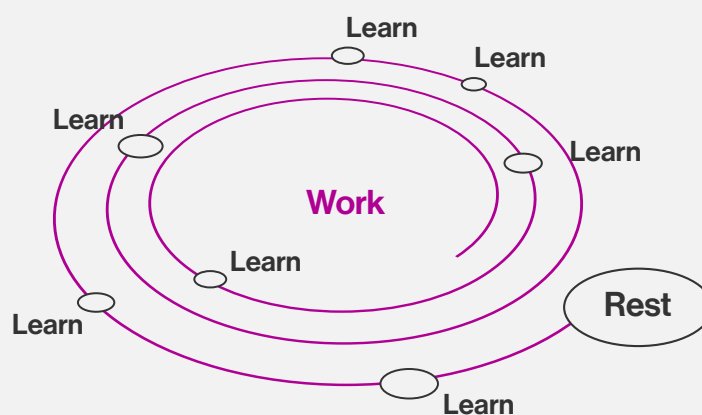
We are missing a crucial “third pillar” in Canada's learning ecosystem: skills development and career services for working-age, employed Canadians—those in precarious jobs and transforming industries, and those facing imminent disruption.

Figure 1 | Moving from a linear to cyclical learning model

Linear model



Cyclical model



For workers, adequate **career services** can facilitate smoother transitions; reduce barriers to information, training and employment; and foster confidence and self-awareness for better decision-making in training and careers. These services can also help employers identify and express their current and future skills needs, improving visibility among workers and aiding in skills matching, recruitment and retention.

However, compared to adults from other peer jurisdictions, Canadian workers are not actively using career services, and those who are aware of these services struggle to access them through the restrictive eligibility criteria of our ‘fail-first’ model. Career development practitioners have a growing list of responsibilities in terms of scope and sophistication but have few resources or professional development opportunities to update their knowledge or expertise. On the employer side, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often lack the workforce planning expertise to define what skills their organizations need, now and in the future, and aren’t getting the support they need from government-funded employment services.

In response, the **Future Skills Centre (FSC)** and **Blueprint** have launched the [Re-imagining Career Services](#) initiative (formerly called *Responsive Career Pathways*). *Re-imagining Career Services* is **developing innovative, future-oriented skills development and career service models to better support workers and employers facing labour market disruptions, especially mid-career workers and SMEs that are set to experience increasing economic uncertainty.**

Together with our partners—The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF), MixtMode, The Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology (MITT), The Training Group at Douglas College (DC) and The Nova Scotia Departments of Labour, Skills and Immigration and Economic Development—Blueprint is leading three user-centred innovation projects. Our goal is to design and test new approaches to skills development and career services and generate evidence to inform a future third pillar of Canada’s learning ecosystem that focuses on working adults.

About this report

This report presents user research findings from the Needs Assessment phase for the Thriving Workplaces project: one of three projects in the *Re-imagining Career Services* initiative (see **Box 1**, below). The objective of the project is to design and test a dual-client career services model, delivered through public employment services, to address the employment and retention needs of workers and small- and medium-sized employers (SMEs). The project is a collaboration between Blueprint, MixtMode Consulting and the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF), operating in partnership with the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, Skills, and Immigration and the Department of Economic Development. The project is funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC).

The project was launched in April 2022, when project leads MixtMode and CCDF engaged the NS departments in an extensive discovery phase to identify innovation opportunities in the system. This culminated in the development of a dual-client service model concept in which services to jobseekers, workers and employers are fully integrated. See the *Discovery Report* produced by MixtMode and CCDF (forthcoming) for an in-depth account of the discovery phase, including an analysis of the project’s collaborative approach to innovation with a public sector partner and with research insights and early ideation around a service model.

To develop and field-test a prototype of this model, in-depth user research with workers and SMEs—both underserved groups within the current career development service landscape—was needed. The project leads engaged The Moment, an innovation and service design organization, to lead this user research using a [human-centred design approach](#) from May 2022 to October 2023. See The Moment's *Research Report* (forthcoming) for a detailed description of their findings, insights and service design recommendations.

This Needs Assessment report draws from the user research findings to address Blueprint's key learning questions for this early phase of the project: what challenges are small employers facing? **What conditions are needed to foster effective recruitment, retention and thriving workplaces? What services would employers need to support recruitment and retention?**

This report is organized into four sections:

- 1. Introduction** (pgs. 9–12) discusses gaps in public employment services affecting their ability to address the recruitment and retention needs of small- and medium-sized (SME) employers. It describes the project's early timeline, partners, high-level goals and stages.
- 2. Methodology** (pgs. 13–18) outlines Blueprint's evidence generation approach, our learning agenda, research design and data sources, including a description of The Moment's user research approach, our approach to analysis and data limitations.
- 3. Findings** (pgs. 19–32) explores the challenges that small employers face in recruiting and retaining workers; what workers feel could support their recruitment and retention; and what both parties need to create thriving workplaces.
- 4. Conclusions and Next Steps** (pg. 33) recaps our key findings and summarizes the next steps in the project.

Box 1 | *Reimagining Career Services*

Our other two projects are described in greater detail in the *Reimagining Career Services for the Future of Work* report. The first is the **Mid-career Transitions** project, which is developing and testing prototype career development service models tailored to the needs of both workers and SME employers in Manitoba and British Columbia. Partners include the Manitoba Institute of Technology and Trades and the Training Group at Douglas College. The second project is the **Career Development Professional Centre (CDPC)**, which is building a pan-Canadian, virtual professional centre of excellence that provides access to the necessary training, resources and learning community for CDPs to respond to new and changing needs within the sector, and in alignment with the new Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals. Our partners for the CDPC are CCDF and MixtMode Consulting.



Executive summary

This report presents user research findings from the Needs Assessment phase for the Thriving Workplaces project: part of the *Re-imagining Career Services* initiative. Thriving Workplaces is a collaboration between Blueprint, MixtMode Consulting and the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF), operating in partnership with the Nova Scotia Departments of Labour, Skills (LSI), and Immigration and Economic Development (ED). The project is funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC).

The project objective is to design and test a dual-client career service model, delivered through public employment services, to address the employment and retention needs of workers and small- and medium-sized employers (SMEs). This dual-client career service model concept was developed by the project leads, MixtMode and CCDF, operating in partnership with Nova Scotia LSI and ED through an extensive discovery phase.

To validate this concept and inform the development of a model prototype, the project engaged The Moment to conduct user research. The Moment used a human-centred design approach to explore the labour market experiences of 23 mid-career workers and 28 small employers across Nova Scotia—both underserved population groups within the career development service landscape—from May 2022 to Oct. 2023. A more detailed *Research Report* by The Moment is forthcoming.

Blueprint reviewed the user research findings to identify key insights that answer our learning agenda for the Needs Assessment phase of the innovation cycle: **What challenges are small employers facing? What conditions are needed to foster effective recruitment, retention and thriving workplaces? What services would employers need to support recruitment and retention?**

Key findings from user research

Understanding the challenges faced by small employers

- **Employers face a lack of qualified candidates**, particularly in high-demand sectors such as trades, hospitality and culinary arts. Scarcity is driving intense competition among small businesses, forcing some to scale back or face closure. Many workers are nearing retirement and graduates often seek opportunities in larger cities.
- **Employers report complications in hiring newcomers and equity-seeking groups.** Much higher numbers of newcomers are helping some employers address critical labour shortages; in some cases, employer participants feel that newcomers do not have the right knowledge, tools and cultural awareness for the jobs available.
- **Employers are not finding the 'right' fit after investing in recruitment and onboarding.** Employers face difficulties assessing candidates during the hiring process and are experiencing a shortage of local talent with specialized skills due to limited training opportunities. Many workers are relocating outside NS for better wages and prospects. Temporary workers, particularly foreign, often leverage longer-term roles as steppingstones before moving to larger cities, causing high turnover for rural employers.

- **Negative cycles of workforce churn trap small employers in ‘survival’ mode and prevent them from ‘thriving.’** Employers face constant workforce churn due to tight labour markets, impacting their ability to plan for growth. This negative cycle forces them to focus resources disproportionately on short-term hiring and staffing to survive, leaving little capacity to improve retention, wages or long-term existential challenges.
- **Employers are constrained in the flexibility and incentives they can provide and unsure how to provide them fairly.** Employers are unsure how to strengthen retention efforts, provide adequate wages, foster employee well-being and offer flexibility and other accommodations without further support.

Strengthening recruitment and retention for both workers and employers

- The research identified **eight ‘magnetic’ factors between workers and employers**. The **greater alignment** of these factors between both parties at the **start** of the employment relationship, the greater their **bond** and potential for **retention**. Since workplace magnetism is also **dynamic**, maintaining this alignment requires ongoing dialogue and a **‘bargain’** between both parties.
- These magnetic factors involve: **i) meaning and values** (the underlying meaning to work and how workers and employers express their values); **ii) skills and competencies** (the abilities that workers have and want to develop and that the employer is looking for); **iii) workplace culture** (how both parties ‘show up’ to work and treat each other); **iv) opportunities for growth** (the need and desire for workers to grow existing skills and assume more responsibilities as businesses evolve and grow); **v) working arrangements** (the tangible when, where and how of the work, as well as the level of flexibility across these facets); **vi) pay and benefits** (often monetary relationships between workers and employers—a balance of what both parties can afford); **vii) inclusion and belonging** (how diverse workers and employers experience and are supported in the workplace as people); and **viii) external conditions** (factors outside the control of both parties that could influence the employment relationship).

Small employers also shared ideas about the supports they needed to improve retention and be more resilient

- **Targeted and tailored information for their challenges.** Employers feel bombarded with irrelevant information and need more customized resources.
- **Just-in-time strategic support.** Employers value timely and effective supports to diagnose challenges, provide tailored solutions for skills development and integrate diverse workers.
- **Guidance and capacity-building.** Employers appreciate guidance meant to build their capacity for future disruptions and help them think more strategically.
- **Advice and mentorship.** Employers seek advice on business and employee management issues from advisors (other owners and retirees) when available.
- **Better understanding of what workplaces and employees need to thrive.** To mitigate turnover, employers want clarity on how the needs of both their employees and businesses can align.

- **Greater opportunities to develop technical and soft skills.** Employers in highly specialized fields (such as construction, IT, etc.) and from equity-seeking communities see the need to develop technical skills. Those in less technical fields feel soft skills are more innate characteristics and feel unprepared to teach them (employers still prefer teaching technical instead of soft skills despite the costs of doing so).

Project leads and The Moment shared a detailed version of these findings with system stakeholders, including the Government of NS, NSW service providers, regional sector councils and other system stakeholders. Between Feb. and May 2024, the team designed a dual-client service model concept and prototype, now being tested in-field at five NSW demonstration sites across NS between May and Oct. 2024. Blueprint will continue to document learnings from the pilot testing period and will share them in a *Final Report*.



1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Labour market fluctuations and the lingering impacts of COVID-19 are creating significant recruitment and retention challenges for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Because SMEs face greater resource constraints than larger organizations, it is harder for them to attract, train and retain the talent they need. They are often forced to prioritize short-term survival over long-term growth, focusing their resources on immediate needs instead of future sustainability. As SME employers form the backbone of the Canadian economy, proactively addressing their recruitment and retention issues is crucial for effectively futureproofing our workforce.^{1,2,3}

Our *Re-imagining Career Services* initiative has identified two gaps in public employment services affecting their ability to address the recruitment and retention needs of SMEs:

1. Focus on rapid labour market attachment instead of career development: There is ample evidence that high-quality career development approaches can help people acquire skills, gain employment and navigate their career paths.^{4,5} However, employment service policy tends to incentivize rapid re-employment—connecting people to jobs as quickly as possible—rather than career development that ensures feasible and sustainable matches. This can lead to turnover that negatively impacts both jobseekers and employers.

2. Lack of dual-client approaches in employment service systems: There is strong evidence that sector-based, dual-client models can help workers secure good jobs in growth sectors and create hiring pipelines to help employers meet their needs.⁶ However, as of yet, these career development innovations have not been effectively integrated with publicly funded systems. This represents an opportunity to design service approaches with significant impacts for jobseekers and to build resilience among SMEs.

1 Lengnick-Hall, C. A., Beck, T. E., & Lengnick-Hall, M. L. (2011). Developing a capacity for organizational resilience through strategic human resource management. *Human resource management review*, 21(3), 243–255. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2010.07.001>

2 Kyndt, E., Dochy, F., Michielsen, M., & Moeyaert, B. (2009). Employee retention: Organisational and personal perspectives. *Vocations and Learning*, 2, 195–215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12186-009-9024-7>

3 Jain, N., & Verma, P. (2022). The mediating effect of talent retention on resilience, proactive personality, employee empowerment and business performance: A conceptual framework and review. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(5), 9117–9123. <https://journalppw.com/index.php/jpsp/article/view/10160>

4 Whiston, S. C., Blustein, D. L. (2013). *The impact of career interventions: Preparing our citizens for the 21st century*. National Career Development Association and Society for Vocational Psychology. http://www.ncda.org/aws/NCDA/asset_manager/get_file/63826?ver=167

5 CEDEFOP. (2023, July). *Investing in career guidance: The case for workers*. <https://www.cedefopeuropa.eu/en/publications/2235>

6 For example, see [NPower Canada](#).

1.2 Thriving Workplaces

In response, the Thriving Workplaces project is designing and testing a dual-client career service model to be delivered through publicly funded employment services.

Together, project leads—MixtMode Consulting and the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF), operating in partnership with the Government of Nova Scotia (see **Box 2**)—are aiming to accomplish three goals:

- **Explore workers and employer needs** to pinpoint opportunities for innovation within public employment services to serve both stakeholders.
- Design and test a **dual-client service model** in partnership with [Nova Scotia Works \(NSW\)](#) employment services providers in an effort to more effectively align the needs of workers and employers and improve their resilience to disruption.
- **Generate evidence** to inform more proactive and responsive public employment services across Canada. Many workforce challenges in Nova Scotia are not unique, so lessons from testing new approaches to support small businesses, workers and jobseekers could influence policy and service innovation nationally.

Box 2 | Project partners

[MixtMode Consulting](#) creates learning solutions that meet the changing needs of the career development sector. As subject matter experts in the field of career development and specialists in designing and delivering blended career development solutions, MixtMode helps governments, organizations and individual practitioners identify the right combination of methods, technologies, tools and training to design and deliver career services that meet shifting individual and economic needs. MixtMode are innovators and thought leaders who believe in accessible, engaging career learning opportunities to inspire workers in transition.

[CCDF](#) is a non-profit organization that works to strengthen the reach and impact of career services in an ever-changing work environment. CCDF is a nationally and internationally recognized leader in the field of career development. Founded in 1980, they have established a legacy of industry-leading work focused on applied research, policy consultation, training, resource development and service capacity building.

Nova Scotia partners consist of two Departments in the Government of [Nova Scotia—Labour, Skills and Immigration \(LSI\)](#) and [Economic Development \(ED\)](#). LSI helps people prepare for job opportunities and build the skills they need and oversees the operations of [Nova Scotia Works](#), the province's public employment service system. ED develops plans, programs and policies that encourage entrepreneurship and investments. They also work with stakeholders to build strategies for business growth.

[The Moment](#) is an Innovation and Service Design company that helps government teams, not-for-profits, institution, and aligned companies solve today's complex challenges while innovating for the future. They were engaged by the project leads to conduct human-centred design field research with employers and workers for this study.

1.3 Timeline and early stages of the Discovery Phase

In early 2022, project partners began exploring innovation in publicly funded career and employment services. These preliminary conversations led to the formation of a working group including MixtMode, CCDF and representatives of the Nova Scotia government. These sessions evolved into the **Discovery Phase**: an **iterative process** of developing a **shared understanding** of Nova Scotia's labour market contexts, challenges, anticipated future disruptions and opportunities for system innovation; and the existing system's capabilities, services, resources and programs for work-seekers and SME employers. MixtMode and CCDF also led extensive engagement with system stakeholders and reviewed existing research and data to inform the project direction. The Discovery Phase culminated in a **dual-client service model concept**, developed by MixtMode and CCDF, in which services to jobseekers, workers and employers are fully integrated. For more details on how the partners worked together throughout this phase, see the Discovery Report produced by MixtMode and CCDF (forthcoming).

The process identified key strengths in the system that could be leveraged for service design and innovation. First, the system is **equipped with certified career development practitioners (CDPs) who deliver high-quality services**. NSW is the only jurisdiction in Canada that mandates professional certification for employed CDPs. Second, **NSW has evolved in recent years to include a more direct focus on serving and meeting the needs of employers**, notably through the introduction of the "Employment Engagement Specialist" role to NSW centres in 2016.

While the system's shift to serving employers provided important foundations, many service providers shared that they were still working to build the capacity, experience and credibility to effectively work with employers. This was especially important due to shifting labour market contexts in Nova Scotia, where many SMEs are struggling to find and keep the workforces they need, and service providers did not feel fully equipped to respond to emerging workforce challenges.

Building on multiple lines of inquiry, partners defined a shared goal: to build a flexible, dual-client employment and career service model that was a) integrated within the NS public employment service system; b) responsive to the changing needs of jobseekers, workers and SME employers; and c) a way to help employers implement workforce strategies to increase their resilience to a changing labour market.

1.4 Needs Assessment field research

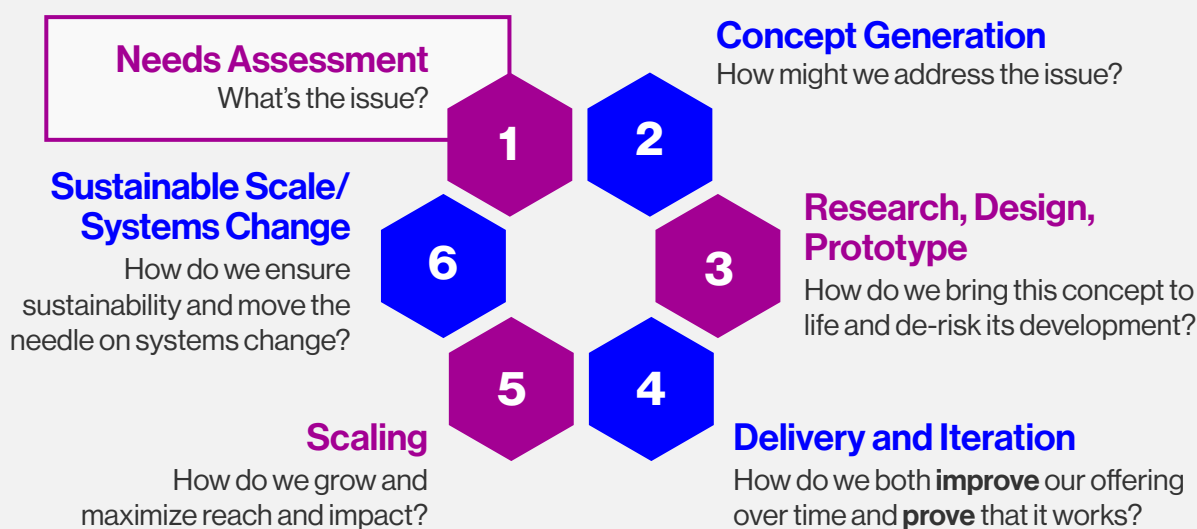
To build a more nuanced, on-the-ground understanding of workers and employers' experiences at their workplaces and with retention, the **project team engaged The Moment** to conduct user research for the Needs Assessment phase using a **human-centred design approach**. Guided by the conceptual model of the dual-client approach and based on The Moment's research, project leads developed an intervention prototype that is being piloted and tested at five demonstration sites within the NSW employment service system between May and October 2024. Findings and learnings for the pilot testing phase will be detailed in the *Final Report*.

2. Methodology

2.1 Blueprint's evidence generation approach

To understand promising service models and how to scale them, Blueprint developed a novel approach to evidence generation that fits within the stages of the innovation cycle (see **Figure 2**). In a well-functioning ecosystem, innovations move along a cycle starting with a needs assessment, moving to conceptualization and design and then to delivery, testing and iteration. For those interventions proven to work, the goal is to expand to meet the need at scale and create system changes to institutionalize the innovation.

Figure 2 | The Six-stage Innovation Cycle



Knowing where an intervention is in the innovation cycle allows us to ask the right questions and collect the right evidence to move the project forward. The three *Reimagining Career Services* projects are currently in Stages 1 to 3 of the innovation cycle (and this report focuses on findings from **Stage 1** in particular). This means our emphasis is on co-designing models with partners and end users and developing and testing multiple iterations. Our evidence generation approach aims to move each project through Stages 3 and 4 via a better understanding of user needs and data-driven, continuous improvement. Interventions typically progress to Stage 4, when they are deemed full models, meaning they are developed with all anticipated components and future changes are expected to focus on continuous improvement.

2.2 Learning agenda

The Needs Assessment phase of the innovation cycle aims to understand challenges and needs that target users are experiencing. Therefore, the remainder of the report will focus on addressing three key questions, which we sought to address based on the user research conducted by The Moment:⁷

1. What challenges are small employers facing?
2. What conditions are needed to foster effective recruitment, retention and thriving workplaces?
3. What services would employers need to support recruitment and retention?

2.3 Research design and data sources

The Moment took a mixed-methods approach to generate evidence.

- 1. Human-centred design (HCD) field research with workers and employers:** *The Moment* designed a research strategy and conducted field research with workers and SME employers in Nova Scotia. Blueprint also supported the data collection by participating in a subset of user interviews. HCD research emphasizes understanding the needs, behaviours and experiences of target users to inform the design and development of products, services and systems. The Moment's research generated insights about users' holistic experiences around the idea of work and career.
- 2. A review of Government of Nova Scotia research:** Blueprint and The Moment reviewed related research conducted by the Government of Nova Scotia, including labour market trends, employer surveys and transcripts and notes from nine consultations and focus group sessions, conducted in 2019 and 2022, with more than 75 participants from service provider and employer groups. These sessions focused on the perspectives of four key equity-deserving groups (i.e., Indigenous Peoples, Black and African Nova Scotians, people with disabilities and newcomers). They were reviewed to (a) ensure sufficient information about these groups' experiences was included in the research; and (b) inform the HCD field research described above.

Sampling and data sources included the following:

- **Purposeful sampling:** The Moment selected worker and employer participants to reflect a broad range of perspectives; criteria included geographies, community typologies, number of years in the workforce, diversity, career experiences and sectors (see **Appendix A** for sampling criteria).
- **Additional engagement of participants in equity-seeking communities:** Despite purposefully sampling for participants from equity-seeking communities, the initial round of recruitment was unable to reach individuals from target communities. To ensure findings included diverse perspectives, the research team worked with the Government of Nova Scotia to connect with employers from equity-seeking communities, including Indigenous, Black and African Nova Scotians, racialized peoples, persons with disabilities and newcomers.

⁷ These are Blueprint's learning questions for the Needs Assessment phase of the project, which align with Blueprint's evidence generation approach and innovation cycle. Other project partners had slightly different focuses and thus were guided by different learning questions and engaged in different lines of inquiry. Please see MixtMode and CCDF's *Discovery Report* (forthcoming) and The Moment's *Research Report* (forthcoming) for their learning questions and findings in response to their questions.

Table 1 summarizes the HCD data collection activities and number of participants engaged for each activity. Overall, the research engaged 23 workers and 28 employers. There was no overlap of participants in the different activities.

Table 1 | Data sources for HCD field research

| Data source | Description | Number of participants |
|--|--|---|
| Pre-interview journal and semi-structured interviews | Worker participants who were invited to the semi-structured interviews were primed with a ‘pre-session journal’; this required them to answer one question prompt per day for five days prior to their interview. The semi-structured interviews explored participants’ ideas of a ‘compelling workplace,’ their career goals and their current experiences at work. | 11 workers |
| Focus groups | Four focus groups were facilitated with worker participants to understand commonalities and differences and unpack diverse experiences related to their past and current workplaces. | 12 workers (four focus groups with three participants each) |
| In-person employer interviews | Field research with SME employers in Nova Scotia in-person at their businesses. Conversations unpacked employers’ ideas of a ‘compelling workplace’ to understand their workplace challenges and what they are currently doing to address them. | 12 employers |
| Virtual employer interviews (from equity-deserving groups) | With support from the Government of Nova Scotia, the research team conducted virtual interviews with employers from equity-deserving groups to uncover their unique experiences. | 16 employers |

2.4 Analysis approach

With support from Blueprint, The Moment analyzed qualitative data (pre-session journals, interviews and focus group discussions) through multiple synthesis sessions, in which field researchers gathered to discuss findings and identify patterns, relationships and trends. Findings were presented to MixtMode, CCDF, stakeholders in Nova Scotia and other Blueprint team members to inform further synthesis of the insights, which were used to inform the prototype of the dual-client employment service model.

For this report, Blueprint reviewed The Moment’s findings and synthesized them in response to our learning questions and to pinpoint insights for a wider public audience. No additional analysis of raw data was conducted.

2.5 Data limitations

- **Data were drawn from a small sample size of workers and SME employers.** Findings reflect the needs of a small sample of participants and so cannot be generalized to the needs of employers and workers across Nova Scotia.
- **Employer participants were from small businesses only.** In Canada, small enterprises are defined as having 2–99 workers and medium enterprises are defined as having 100–499 employees. While our intention was to engage small and medium-sized enterprises, all participating businesses had only 2–50 employees.⁸ With this gap, findings may not be representative of larger SMEs.
- **Employer participants may be subject to self-selection bias.** Small employers who participated in the research were generally those who demonstrated care for and investment in the workplace experiences of their staff. These perspectives may not be representative of less invested employers.
- **Despite intentional efforts, research did not reach workers from equity-deserving communities:** The Moment did not successfully reach workers from equity-deserving communities in the initial round of participant recruitment despite purposefully sampling for people from those communities (see **Appendix A**). When The Moment requested warm connections from project stakeholders, community partners in Nova Scotia felt hesitant to introduce working people from equity-seeking groups to avoid community members feeling ‘over-researched.’ The study filled this gap by reviewing documentation of past research activities with equity-deserving communities commissioned by the Government of Nova Scotia.

⁸ One likely reason for this gap is that larger small enterprises and medium-sized enterprises are often transitional sizes for a business; once they reach over 50 employees, they typically expand to a large enterprise or need to move back down to a smaller size if this expansion does not work.



3. Findings

3.1 What challenges are small employers facing?

3.1.1 Amid an aging local workforce, employers faced a lack of qualified candidates.

Employers sensed a **general shortage** of workers with the technical skills needed for roles in in-demand sectors, such as the trades, hospitality and culinary arts. This scarcity was driving competition for qualified workers between local small businesses. It was also forcing employers to scale back their operations and hours and possibly face closure.

Employers observed that not only were their **workforces aging**, but they were facing **difficulties attracting young skilled workers**, creating a decline in qualified employees. While many workers were close to retirement, recent graduates often sought work in larger cities with more thriving economies. For example, The Moment spoke with an owner of a small multi-generational business whose current employees were approaching retirement. With no incoming talent, the owner was forced to make the difficult decision to sell the business rather than pass it down to his son.

“One of our cooks had her knee replaced. We couldn’t replace her [for] an entire summer [so we] couldn’t open past 6 p.m.”

— **Restaurant employer**

“It has been a nightmare to find people [with the technical skills].”

— **Autobody shop employer**

“There aren’t [people with craft brew experience] around here. We don’t have a big enough pool of people who have lived away and come back [with that].”

— **Brewery employer**

“The good students are in Halifax ... and a lot of the kids don’t want to be in Sydney.”

— **Autobody shop employer**

3.1.2 Employers wanted to embrace—and hire—newcomers and equity-seeking groups but reported complications in doing so.

Some **participants observed a drastic change in population characteristics of the local labour market**, with much-higher numbers of “from-aways” (**i.e., newcomer immigrants and international students**). Increases in these populations were helping some employers address critical labour shortages; a push for immigration had attracted new, motivated workers to fill gaps in the local workforce. Most employer participants in such communities welcomed these shifts and were excited about leveraging newcomers and immigrants to sustain their businesses.

In some cases, however, employer participants felt that newcomers did not have the right knowledge, tools and cultural awareness for the jobs available. This was especially the case for business owners who hired foreign workers and/or skilled immigrants who later moved on to other opportunities.

“Without the immigration program, we wouldn’t exist. Sixty percent of our staff are immigrants.”—

— **BIPOC restaurant employer**

“It’s great that [immigrants] want to come to work.”

— **Food production business employer**

Employers also reported **unique considerations and challenges for hiring workers from equity-deserving communities**. For instance, Indigenous and Black employers were often motivated to ‘give back’ to their community and hire people who looked like them. Some employers were concerned about how to recruit equity-deserving workers proactively while not excluding others.

3.1.3 Employers were not finding the ‘right’ hire after investing in recruitment and onboarding.

Many employers discussed experiences of **losing new hires even after investing in onboarding and training activities**. The resulting loss of time and money can “hit [small employers] in the gut” and make them hesitant about investing in future recruitment efforts. The field research uncovered three main challenges employers experience in finding the right hire:

i. Employers encountered difficulties assessing whether a candidate is ‘right’ in the hiring process:

Several employers shared that they had poor experiences hiring; some candidates who appeared qualified on their applications did not meet expectations after starting the role. The reverse was also true: workers often decided that a workplace did not meet their expectations and moved on. As a result, employers relied on word of mouth and recommendations from their networks to build confidence when hiring—especially in smaller communities—reducing the number of unknowns to reduce the chance of turnover. It is uncertain whether this strategy actually works.

ii. There was limited access to talent with specialized skills and to local training programs for in-demand roles and sectors.

Employers noted that there was a lack of local talent possessing the skills and training necessary for highly specialized fields like construction, auto mechanics, well-drilling, IT and brewing. Both employers and workers noted a lack of educational and training opportunities, making it difficult for people to enter and/or grow their careers. For some industries, such as trades and well-drilling, it was common practice for people to move to other provinces to pursue training and a career and/or for employers to send their staff out-of-province for hands-on training in hopes that they would return. However, employers in the sector noted that many people decided not to return to NS due to higher wages and more opportunities.

iii. Workers leveraged longer-term roles as temporary opportunities. This was a particular pain point for employers in smaller communities and/or those with strong competition for talent from other regions. Employers sometimes relied on hiring foreign workers to fill their positions due to a shrinking workforce, but many international workers chose to move on to larger cities after attaining Permanent Residency. Larger employers, larger cities and other provinces all swayed talent.

“[I want to hire neurodiverse people], but it’s hard to say it right without reverse discrimination.”

— **Neurodiverse coaching employer**

“[It can be] hard to hire folks with disabilities; too many things come along with it.”

— **Agricultural processing employer**

“No problem finding people; it’s the right people [who are what they say on paper]. I’ve had to lay people off in the first few weeks.”—

— **Cafe owner**

“You hire somebody, you train them, do the paperwork for the PR, they get the PR, they’re gone.”—

— **Immigrant restaurant owner**

“I ask potential employees if they have any interest in travelling to Alberta [before hiring].”—

— **Seafood storage employer**

3.1.4 Negative cycles of workforce churn trapped small employers in ‘survival’ mode and prevented them from ‘thriving.’

Small employers, both in seasonal and year-round industries, were also impacted by constant churns of labour supply and demand. While turnovers are regular occurrences in business operations, interviews with small employers suggested that they were **increasingly being caught in a negative cycle of workforce churn** that was affecting their ability to operate their business and plan for growth and/or succession.

Figure 3 illustrates a typical cycle of churn described by small employers.

Figure 3 | Workforce churn and its impact on small employers



As a result, many employers were spending a disproportionate amount of time, money and resources on hiring and recruiting to ‘survive,’ losing out on their capacity to ‘thrive.’ Small employers were often focused on short-term goals such as staffing and covering costs and had little capacity to strengthen retention and well-being and to provide adequate wages for themselves and workers. In interviews, employers

expressed feeling exhausted, overworked and that “[they were] not even making a living wage.” In many cases, small employers were facing existential challenges but had neither a solution to address them nor the resources to plan for the long term. As a food and hospitality industry employer put it: “[It’s] like a revolving door ... they come and move on in eight to 12 months. We are constantly hiring. It’s exhausting.”

3.1.5 Employers were constrained in the flexibility and incentives they could provide and unsure about how to provide them fairly.

Small employers acknowledged that in the post-pandemic labour market, there was an increased demand from workers for flexible working arrangements, higher pay, benefits and other accommodations. In most cases, employers were happy to support their workers and encourage retention by creating encouraging atmospheres, implementing benefits from paying above minimum wage, providing flexibility, perks and business shares and offering cross-training and career development opportunities and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Despite their best efforts, employers reported **limits to what they could offer without compromising the financial viability of their businesses and requirements of the role**. While some of these limitations were broader than workforce development needs (e.g., they were related to the need to change service offerings according to new consumer behaviours), they still had impacts for recruitment and retention. For example:

- **On flexible schedules:** A food services employer cited experiences of workers being unwilling to work on the busiest days of the week.
- **On paid time off:** Beyond meeting basic labour law requirements, it was difficult for some small employers to offer additional paid time off, especially for non-full-time employees.
- **On wages:** Many employers mentioned that, in the context of economic inflation, it was becoming financially unfeasible to provide a living wage to all staff and that minimum wage increased faster than revenue could keep up. Some employers were finding themselves working for minimum wage themselves to keep their businesses afloat.
- **On providing fair workplace accommodations:** Some employers felt that if they provided additional accommodations to those who ask, other employees may perceive this as unfair.
- **On diverse workforces:** Some employers were unsure how to include workers with diverse backgrounds. This was the case even for BIPOC-owned businesses. Overall, employers felt that DEI principles and practices were difficult to operationalize.

3.2 What conditions are needed to foster effective recruitment, retention and thriving workplaces?

In interviews, **workers** shared a wide range of personal priorities and job-related needs that informed their perceptions of suitable, long-term workplaces. Similarly, **employers** discussed the skills and characteristics they expected workers to have to contribute to their businesses.

In making sense of these various priorities and expectations, The Moment identified eight factors at play in any workplace (see **Figure 4**). These factors are **magnetic**: they have the potential to attract workers and employers together where there is alignment on them, or push them apart when there is misalignment. **In other words, greater alignment between workers and employers on these magnetic factors may facilitate greater potential for retention and thriving.**

Figure 4 | Magnetic factors

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Meaning and Values Underlying meaning to work and how workers and employers express their values | Skills and Competencies Abilities that workers have, and are interested in developing, and the employer is looking for. | Workplace Culture How workers and employers show up to work and treat each other. | Growth Need and desire for workers to grow existing skills and take on more work and responsibilities as the business evolves and grows. |
| Working Arrangements The tangible when, where, and how of the work, as well as level of flexibility across these facets. | Pay and Benefits Tangible, often monetary relationship between workers and employers—a balance of what both parties can afford. | Inclusion and Belonging How diverse workers and employers experience and are supported in the workplace as people. | External Conditions Factors outside the control of both workers and employers but could influence the employment relationship. |

Workplace magnetism is also dynamic; as people's lives and circumstances change, and as businesses and economies evolve, needs, priorities and expectations also shift. Employee turnover is more likely when the magnetic factors become misaligned. In this sense, **managing retention and churn at the workplace requires an ongoing dialogue and ‘bargain’** between workers and employers related to these factors.

Table 2 details workers' and employers' perspectives and experiences related to these factors from interview and focus group data.

Table 2 | Findings related to the Magnetic Factors

| Magnetic factor | Workers' perspective | Small employers' perspective |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Meaning and values | Workers described what work meant to them and how it helped them express their values. Work could be their means to support a social cause, help others and solve their problems or provide for their families. Overall, workers valued jobs that helped them discover and fulfill a sense of meaning and purpose. | Small employers often had purpose, goals, values and plans that underpinned their ventures; they often appreciated workers/ candidates who shared the same values and passions. Some employers felt disappointed when they couldn't find workers with similar passions as them (e.g., a love for cars or craft beer) and could sometimes overlook other qualities about workers (e.g., lack of skills and competencies) if they did. |
| Skills and competencies | Workers often expressed pride in the technical and social skills, competencies and experiences they brought to the table. Participants valued employers who "gave them a chance" and opportunities to demonstrate their potential. This was especially true for workers from groups that have historically been marginalized from the labour market and for skilled immigrants who have limited Canadian work experience. | Employers valued technical and soft employability skills. While technical speciality was essential for some roles (e.g., in the trades), many roles could benefit from general social and employability skills. Many employers also felt confident in training new hires on basic technical knowledge and skills. |
| Workplace culture | Workers often discussed how positive and/or negative workplace cultures (i.e., the ways workers and employers show up and treat each other) can significantly impact their experience and sense of inclusion at work. Workers described positive workplace cultures as those where people were treated with respect, kindness, fairness, as equals and as whole persons. Workers from equity-seeking communities appreciated employers who demonstrated cultural awareness. Participants also enjoyed having employers who were transparent in their communications, who empowered them and who addressed issues as they arose. | Many small businesses shared that their culture was laid back, family-like, comfortable, low pressure and fun. At the same time, this lack of hierarchical structure could sometimes lead to employers feeling uncomfortable with confronting workers or managing conflict. Workplace culture is also influenced by leadership and management style. Many employers felt that they led by example, showed that there's no job "the boss" won't do and had frequent check-ins with their staff. |

| Magnetic factor | Workers' perspective | Small employers' perspective |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Opportunities for growth | Workers had different motivations for growth. Some were eager for opportunities to advance and learn while others were content with where they were (such as in jobs they didn't consider long-term careers). Largely, workers appreciated employers who provided options for acquiring new skills, applying skills in different areas, enhancing existing skills and career advancement. Equity-seeking workers especially wanted fair opportunities for advancement and to demonstrate their skills. | Some small businesses were still growing and needed employees to take on more responsibilities; these employers appreciated workers who wanted to grow. Others (e.g., in food services) acknowledged that the jobs they offered did not have much space for growth; these employers were content with workers who viewed the positions as steady jobs or as steppingstones instead. |
| Working arrangements | When asked to describe their work, workers often noted the when, where and how and discussed how work fit within their personal lives. Most participants understood their core role requirements (e.g., part-time, hourly, contract, shift-based, seasonal, remote, in-person, travel, etc.) but appreciated employers who were willing to provide flexibility and other accommodations (e.g., for cultural holidays, grieving periods, medical appointments, caregiving, etc.). | Different roles and positions require different working arrangements. Some employers (especially in professional services) felt comfortable with remote work arrangements, while others in industries with customer-facing services appreciated having workers with more scheduling flexibility. Most employers were willing to provide accommodations and flexibility whenever possible. |
| Pay and benefits | Workers felt that pay and benefits needed to be commensurate to the cost of living, their stage in life and financial objectives. Because of this, workers had diverse ideas of what was sufficient. While some workers were primarily motivated by pay and benefits, most felt that other aspects of work could be more important. | Most small employer participants were interested in providing a living wage to workers, which has become increasingly challenging in the post-COVID economy. In addition to formal pay and benefits, some small employers also considered informal benefits to reward workers, including borrowing equipment, free meals, employee discounts and even housing support. |

| Magnetic factor | Workers' perspective | Small employers' perspective |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Inclusion and belonging | Most worker participants wanted to feel like they belonged to a team, could be themselves and were valued for who they were. In particular, workers from equity-seeking communities were wary of feeling tokenized at the workplace and appreciated workplaces that genuinely valued what they brought to the table. People with disabilities could be fearful of disclosing disabilities due to stigma, which could lead to less support while employed. | Many employers were intentional about creating inclusive workplaces. At the same time, small employers felt unequipped to have conversations around difficult issues such as cultural differences. While employers were keenly aware of the need to build DEI-related capacities and cultural awareness, many lacked capacity to undergo formal training. |
| External conditions | Workers often reflected on how their lives fit with community factors such as housing options, transportation, cost of living and other community services (e.g. education, daycare, health services, etc.). Most workers were interested in staying in a community due to local connections and opportunities. | Employers reflected on the impact of broad trends—labour market shifts, local and regional economic conditions, immigration trends and local education pathways—on their recruitment and retention challenges. Those from equity-seeking communities noted that historical marginalization from training and work experiences made it more challenging to find qualified candidates among community members. |

When both parties **clearly communicate and align needs, expectations and offerings early in the recruitment process, they can better anticipate and mitigate turnover.** In interviews, employers noted that greater clarity on and acceptance of their employees' career development interests supported them in providing what their workers needed—or whether they needed to plan for change. For workers, having a transparent and open line of communication with employers also helped them assess whether a workplace contributed to their needs and priorities.

"I tell everyone this is a baseline job—I want but don't expect them to stay ... I ask them, 'what can I teach you to get to your next spot?' Usually, they stay."

— **Cafe owner**

"We don't want to hold her back forever. If she's able to get those new roles and put it on her resume, that's motivation for her."

— **BIPOC small business owner**

3.3 What services would employers need to support recruitment and retention?

Small employers often acknowledged that they were **learning, developing and navigating their career journeys as business leaders**. Many had recently become employers for the first time and were drawing on their own past experiences (with their own employers) to inform their approach. Largely, these employers did not have formal training on how to hire, motivate or manage employees.

In interviews and focus groups, small employers shared ideas about the supports they thought they needed to improve retention, mitigate churn and be more resilient—to foster more thriving workplaces. **Table 3** synthesizes these ideas into **six key areas**:

“I have learned from clients how to treat employees and see social media businesses making mistakes.”
— **Tech startup employer**

“I rely on what I learned as a parent or as a teacher, as a son, as a friend.”
— **Brewery employer**

Table 3 | Six areas to support small employers in retention and build resilience

| Support | Description |
|--|--|
| Targeted and tailored information for their challenges | Employers recognized that there were many resources available from employer-oriented organizations. However, they reported not having adequate time to review the overwhelming volume of content. Instead, they felt “bombarded” with information that did not seem relevant to their immediate needs. “When are you supposed to find the time to do that when you’re running your day-to-day?” — Coaching business employer |
| Just-in-time strategic support | Employers strongly preferred supports that were timely, quick, effective at helping them diagnose the challenges they were facing, and able to provide tailored solutions in the moment. This was especially the case for supports meant to help develop employee skills and employer leadership skills and for integrating diverse workers (including equity-seeking groups and newcomers). |
| Guidance and capacity building | Employers also appreciated guidance meant to build their capacity for future disruptions. One grocery employer spoke of a small micro-lender who, as a condition for funding, required them to write regular reflections on their business operations. The employer found this reflection extremely helpful in building their understanding of their business and thinking ahead, more intentionally and strategically. In their own words, “What I got from the [micro-lender] ... was someone to talk to.” |

| Support | Description |
|---|---|
| Advice and mentorship | <p>Business owners spoke of tapping into advisors, other business owners and local retirees (when available) to learn from people more experienced in business and employee management issues. However, trusted and experienced advisors could be limited in smaller communities.</p> <p>“I found it better to look at people’s actual experience and go from there—not a course, or a book. Better to hear what has worked for people or not.”—Well driller employer</p> |
| Better understanding of what their workplaces and employees need to thrive | <p>Employers wanted clarity over what their employees needed, what their businesses needed and how each party’s needs and offerings could be aligned to create workplaces that fostered retention. They saw this as an important step in advancing the viability, desirability and sustainability of their business, ultimately mitigating turnover.</p> <p>“I want to shift from [focusing] just about the work to the whole person and [to creating a] desirable experience for staff.”—Tech startup employer</p> |
| Greater opportunities to develop technical and soft skills | <p>This was particularly acute in highly specialized fields like construction, auto mechanics, well-drilling and IT. Employers from equity-seeking communities felt that training opportunities in growth sectors (such as IT) were especially important for people in their communities as a means of overcoming historical, systemic barriers to pursuing these career paths and training opportunities.</p> <p>For small business employers in less technical businesses, soft skills—qualities like friendliness, service-mindedness, responsibility, passion and collaboration—were seen as innate characteristics. In other words, employers felt unprepared to train employees in soft skills. This perception may stem from experiences with workers without basic work readiness and positive attitudes. Although it costs time and resources to teach workers technical skills, employers still preferred doing so over teaching soft skills.</p> <p>“You can’t teach [people] how to have a good rapport and be pleasant, but I can teach [them] the difference between two kinds of rice!”—Bulk food merchant employer</p> |



4. Conclusions and next steps

4.1 Key takeaways

Workers in Nova Scotia have a range of needs from their jobs, impacting their motivation, dedication to their employers and capacity for personal and professional growth. But while small employers often want to prioritize these needs, they have a limited ability and few opportunities to do so. At the same time, employers are struggling with recruitment, retention and cycles of turnover while navigating broader disruptions to their industries, based on technological changes and post-pandemic consumer behaviour, that further contribute to instability. These challenges are preventing both workers small employers from ‘thriving’—from planning for the future and meeting their needs—effectively trapping them in ‘survival mode.’

Addressing the issue of churn and supporting employers’ recruitment and retention needs is foundational for future-proofing the labour market. This research suggests that employers and workers may be able to anticipate and mitigate turnover by achieving **clear and aligned expectations over various ‘magnetic’ factors at the start of the employment relationship.**

Alignment on these magnetic factors has the potential to create more predictable, manageable and stable employment relationships. After onboarding, employers must continue to work to understand their employees’ career development goals while refining their workforce development objectives. Employers also need strategically designed and targeted supports, resources and tools that are accessible, responsive and effective.

Findings from this Needs Assessment pose five considerations for future work:

- How might applying a dual-client focus to workforce issues help achieve greater alignment between workers and employers and foster more thriving workplaces?
- What kind of resources and service guidelines do career development practitioners in the public employment service system need to deliver such dual-client services?
- Could the magnetic factors provide an effective framework for employers to understand their employees’ evolving needs and wants, and help guide and refine employers’ workforce development objectives?
- What kinds of workplace alignment, recruitment and retention outcomes can we expect from a dual-client service?
- How can supports remain adaptable to changing worker and employer needs to ensure they go beyond addressing today’s issues alone and instead build the ability to futureproof the workforce?

4.2 Ongoing work and next steps

The *Discovery Report* (forthcoming) outlines how the project leads have continued to engage system stakeholders, including the Government of Nova Scotia, NSW service providers, regional sector councils and beyond.

Between February and May 2024, drawing on the original dual-client model concept designed by MixtMode and CCDF as well as findings from The Moment's user research, the Thriving Workplaces project team designed a service prototype, Thriving Workplaces, to be implemented by NSW service providers. This prototype involves a series of scalable interventions for delivery to jobseekers, workers and employers and is being field-tested in partnership with five NSW demonstration sites across the province. Testing will occur between May and October 2024. A description of the identified functions and components for the early prototype can be found in the Thriving Workplaces *Discovery Report* (forthcoming).

The Thriving Workplaces project team and Blueprint are collaborating on an evidence generation strategy to gather learnings and insights from the field-testing phase. The Thriving Workplaces team will share interim findings as part of their knowledge mobilization activities, and Blueprint will share a full description of the prototype and final learnings from the field test in a *Final Report*.

Appendix A

Sampling criteria

| Criteria | Representation |
|--|---|
| Typology of community (cross-referenced with the Nova Scotia Works Economic Regions) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban Centres: +40K • Small Cities and Regional Towns: 10–40K • Exurban/rural: 2–7.5K • Rural/remote: 10–1K |
| Number of years in the workforce as an adult or number of years in business | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0–5 years • 6–15 years • 16 or more years |
| Sector representation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture/Fishing/Forestry • Retail • Construction and Trades • Manufacturing • Accommodation/Food (Hospitality and Tourism) • Professional/Technical (Legal, Accounting, Consultant, Engineers) • Healthcare and Social Assistance |
| Demographic dimensions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender • Age • LGBTQ2SIA+ • Black and African Nova Scotians • Indigenous/Mi'kmaq • Newcomers and Immigrants • Persons with Disabilities |

| Criteria | Worker representation | Employer representation |
|--|---|---|
| Career experience or business challenge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced • Career transitions • Full-time • Part-time • Seasonal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Startup • Expanding to New Location • Merger or Acquisition • Contraction • Digital Transformation • New Line of Business • Status Quo • Green Energy Transition • Diversity Transition |

