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The Future Skills Podcast

Season 5: Episode 1

What Quality of Work Means in a Changing Labour Market

What defines quality of work in today's economy? In this episode, host Jeremy Strachan speaks with Laura McDonough from the Future Skills Centre and Dr. Olga Morawczynski from Heal-3 to explore how wages, job security, mental health, and workplace culture impact our experience at work. They discuss how research from the Future Skills Centre has shed insights on the evolving expectations of workers, the role of leadership in job satisfaction, and how benefits and training can shape long-term career well-being. As workplaces continue to change, and as Canada's workforce challenges continue to evolve, understanding what job quality means is becoming more important than ever.

Guests

Laura McDonough, Associate Director of Knowledge Mobilization & Insights at the Future Skills Centre

Dr. Olga Morawczynski, Founder of Heal-3

Host

Jeremy Strachan

Links

Future Skills Centre and Conference Board of Canada links, such as recommended articles and webpages, social media handles, etc.

Future Skills Centre Homepage: <https://fsc-ccf.ca/>

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State of Skills Report: Quality of Work: [English](#) | [French](#)

Improving Quality of Work in Canada: Prioritizing mental health with diverse and inclusive benefits: [English](#) | [French \(forthcoming\)](#)

Transcript

Jeremy: Welcome to Season 5 of the Future Skills Podcast, brought to you by the Future Skills Centre. I'm Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate at The Conference Board of Canada, and your host for the season. On the Future Skills Podcast, we explore what matters most to Canadians when it comes to skills, training, and the ever-changing world of work.

Since 2019, The Future Skills Centre has been driving Canada's workforce transformation by funding innovative training solutions, cutting-edge research, and inclusive partnerships to ensure everyone has the skills to thrive in a changing economy.

In this episode, we're going to talk about something that affects workers across industries, across jobs, and across Canada: quality of work. I speak with the Future Skills Centre's Laura McDonough on how the idea of quality of work has changed since the pandemic, and how remote and hybrid work have influenced our relationship to our jobs. Laura wrote the *State of Skills Insights Report* on quality of work, and you can find a link to that and more in the show notes.

Then, we'll hear from Dr. Olga Morawczynski, who will situate the conversation about quality of work within the context of workplace mental health. Some recent research she's done, funded by the Future Skills Centre, explores the link between mental health and flexible workplace benefits—key factors in determining job quality. She'll share insights from her research on how organizations should be rethinking wellness, benefits, and workplace culture to improve not just employee well-being, but overall quality of work.

Quality of work is more than a paycheck—it shapes our well-being, our economic resilience, and social cohesion. Research from the Future Skills Centre underscores that Canadian workers increasingly value job security, fair compensation, and work-life balance alongside traditional markers of employment quality. But beyond these fundamentals, quality of work is also about autonomy, professional growth, and a sense of purpose. The shift towards knowledge-based industries, automation, and remote work has redefined expectations, making skills development and career adaptability central to how Canadians perceive a “good job.”

Research by the Future Skills Centre has shown that access to lifelong learning and upskilling opportunities can equip workers with the tools to navigate a shifting labour market.

Laura McDonough is the Associate Director of Knowledge Mobilization and Insights at the Future Skills Centre. Her areas of expertise include the non-profit sector; equity, diversity, and inclusion; as well as evaluation and learning. Before joining the Future Skills Centre, she served as the Senior Manager of Research, Public Policy, and Evaluation at United Way Greater Toronto.

[To Laura]: Laura, thanks for being here. Welcome to the podcast.

Laura: Thank you so much for having me. It's my pleasure to be here.

Jeremy: Great. So let's get into it. When we talk about quality of work in 2025, what is it that we're talking about?

Laura: We're still talking about the usual suspects. So the things that were and have always been at the heart of quality of work, you know, wages, benefits, stability, those things that are really still critical given increasing cost of living, groceries, housing, energy, all of those prices are going up.

But now, since the impact of the pandemic, we've added a couple of new elements to the mix as well. Things that really weren't on any workers' radar, or most workers' radar, ten years ago, and they're now really important aspects of how people think about the quality of work, and most profoundly, for knowledge workers.

Jeremy: The Future Skills Centre has looked extensively at the quality of work. And I recall the *State of Skills Insights Report* highlighted nearly 20 unique projects focused on this topic. Can you share more about these initiatives?

Laura: Yeah, so we put out a funding call and received responses. We went with approximately 20 projects. That included background research pieces, literature reviews on quality of work to understand where we're at in terms of definitions and understandings of quality of work around the world.

We did do a fairly large survey with 5,000 workers across the country on quality of work, specifically. We looked at hybrid and remote work arrangements. So, what the advantages were, what the concerns were from both the employer and the employee and the issues that came up during the pandemic related to those in terms of surveillance and monitoring of employees and what that policy development looks like; how workers were doing in terms of the skills to actually use the digital technologies that were required, as well as right to disconnect policies, making it so that you're not living at work while you're in your home office. We did some work on workplace benefits and again, the next guest can go into more details on that, but also looking at how the availability of workplace benefits has changed amidst like labour and skills shortages over the last couple of years.

We did a couple of locally focused projects. So, one in Grand Erie and one in Nova Scotia, so very localized looks at what quality of work was looking like there to inform workforce development strategy in those regions.

And then the last bucket of work was looking at the impact of the pandemic on quality of work for specific groups. So, I mentioned gig workers and people with autism; people living with disabilities were a focus as well as young workers and newcomers.

Jeremy: So, among others, the *State of Skills Insights Report* identifies employee training as one aspect influencing the quality of work, and you did mention this earlier on, but I'd love to hear more about that. It caught my attention given how much we're hearing about skills gaps in the labour force.

Laura: Yeah, I think the message is that work is changing. The labour market is dynamic, it's volatile, and expectations are that that's going to continue, it's going to intensify. Everyone, whether you're an employer or a worker, everyone's being asked to adjust and pivot.

And workers are cognizant of that. As part of the package of benefits that come with employment, workers are increasingly wanting and expecting some kind of learning

opportunities to progress their careers. And in some cases, that is to progress their careers. And in some cases, it's just to stay where they are because the demands are changing so quickly.

So there's a general recognition across projects that this is a part of the strategy that employers can use to increase the meaning of work for folks, to find value in the work that they're doing, and to act as a tool for recruitment and retention.

And that can look like training and skills initiatives for the current employees. It can look like cross training; so, someone learning to do another person's job. It's mentorship programs; it's leadership cultivation, and really being deliberate about that. One of the projects we funded was just looking at the impact of the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit and how many of those folks used some of that money in order to pursue skills and training.

And 40 percent of all of the survey respondents that were talked to during that project said, that's what they did with it. They did some type of education and training opportunity with that benefit. And so, you know, it's really clear: In our own survey on employment and skills that we do with Environics and the Diversity Institute, we see like just under a third of workers who are getting training in the last year are paying for it themselves. So, workers are definitely getting that message.

Employers need to make some more investments there. So, some employers are responding to that need. They're offering more training and skills development opportunities. We can see a shift in job ads, for example.

A project out of McGill looked at job ads before the pandemic and after to see if we'd seen an increase in employers offering that kind of thing, and we do see an increase in that. But we also know from our own survey work that employers are not doing enough in terms of investing in training and that typically what they're investing in are the legislatively necessary pieces around accessibility and health and safety and such, which are super important, but not necessarily the things that are giving you the skills for the future.

Jeremy: Those are all great points. One of the things that I noticed in reading the *Insights Report* is when it comes to training employees, we have to think about the different—the different people in the different levels and organizations that are also needing to be trained. And one of the things that I took away as well, too, is this piece about managers and bosses and their ability to communicate effectively, their ability to demonstrate all of these soft and social and emotional skills as part of that calculus of quality of work.

Laura: It came up across a number of projects, not just in this portfolio around quality of work, but our broader portfolio of skills and training initiatives and how critical those supervisors and managers of frontline staff are to quality of work in general; to recruitment; to retention; to resolving some of these skills and labour shortages that we have.

Jeremy: So, what is on the horizon for FSC on this topic? And how do you see the conversation around quality of work in Canada evolving in the next two, three, four, five years?

Laura: So, labour shortages, skill shortages, they aren't going away. The labour market of today and into the future is volatile, it's dynamic, because that's how the world is, too. We're going to continue to be interested in quality of work. We're investing in research, in innovation pilots, and evaluation of those projects, but mainly looking at it through our focus areas.

We're exploring pathways to jobs. We need the right supports for workers to navigate career pathways, to transition between jobs and sectors as smoothly as possible, given the volatility that we're facing.

Tech and automation: We're currently engaging in research to figure out which workers are going to be impacted and how. I think really importantly in the conversation around tariffs and trade is to think about the role of small and medium enterprises in Canada. They make up a large part of the Canadian economy, but tend to have lower productivity levels, to be slower adopters of technology, to under invest in training. There's a lot of barriers facing them.

We're also going to continue to make investments in effective approaches that target specific groups. So, inclusion of groups who are disproportionately impacted by these rapidly changing economic conditions. And Future Skills specifically focuses on Black youth, newcomers, Indigenous, and Northern communities.

Last, but not least: Sustainable jobs. We are continuing to make investments in place and sector- based approaches that are really needed to coordinate workforce development strategies across all kinds of different actors.

And finally, we're doing all of this work with existing partners to scale up, to do knowledge mobilization. But we're also inviting a range of new partners to the table who have interventions to test or ideas that need development.

Jeremy: Laura, thanks so much for joining me on the podcast today. It was great to talk to you.

Laura: Thank you so much for having me.

Jeremy: My conversation with Laura really got me thinking about what quality of work truly means in 2025. One of the biggest shifts in what determines our quality of work has been around mental health. More than ever, workplaces are recognizing the need for support and well-being alongside productivity. Our next guest will do a deep dive in the role of mental health in quality of work

Dr. Olga Morawczynski is the founder of Heal-3, a company that supports organizations with workplace wellness. Dr. Morawczynski has authored over 20 papers, including *Improving Quality of Work in Canada: Prioritizing Mental Health with Diverse and Inclusive Benefits*. This report was funded by the Future Skills Centre, and you can find a link the show notes.

[To Olga]: Olga, welcome to the podcast. Thanks so much for being here.

Olga: Thank you, Jeremy, for having me.

Jeremy: Since today's episode is all about quality of work, I want to dig into the report I mentioned in your introduction, *Improving Quality of Work in Canada*. In that paper, you surveyed 506 Canadians and interviewed 35 people, and one key finding was the connection between employee benefit plans and mental health. Since mental health is a crucial aspect of

job quality, I'd love for you to expand on that—how do benefits impact well-being, and what does that mean for improving overall work quality in Canada?

Olga: Yeah, thank you. This is actually a topic I'm very passionate about, but I think probably the most important thing to take away is the fact that benefits as they are today are just not effective for what's happening around our mental health, especially after the pandemic.

And I'll give you a few reasons for this. The first is limited coverage. When you look at a lot of organizations, probably they might have \$500 for, like, psychotherapy. That covers two sessions, right? If you look at what people need for real recovery, I'll just give you some kind of high level numbers. Mild depression, you need to at least have up to 12 sessions; severe depression, over 16 sessions; psychosis, over 25 sessions. So if you have coverage for two sessions, it's very difficult to then actually get the care that you need. And I think that's probably the first challenge.

The second big challenge is that over half of the population is treatment resistant. Now, what that means is that they don't respond very well to what is covered under benefits, and that's talk therapy and that's medication. There's a lot of other modalities that are really, really good for these segments. So there's been a lot of testing around ketamine, things like deep brain stimulation. There's kind of a lot more for treatment resistant depression, but these are not things that are covered under our employee benefit plans.

And just to say that these plans and the structure of what's covered under mental health, they haven't changed for years. I would even say decades. So we really need to modernize our benefits to align to the actual needs of the workforce.

Jeremy: That's a great point, actually, in the same way that I think when we talk about quality of work, we can't talk about it the same way we talked about, well, what does quality of work mean in 1985 even 1995, really? Could you speak to how we think about what mental health refers to in regards to quality of work, maybe even 10 years ago? And how has that shifted in your experience?

Olga: Well, I think the first thing is that we're having more conversations and I think there's been a lot of very, very wonderful public campaigns by Bell, by others, around the fact that we just need to de-stigmatize mental health. I think there's confusion around one thing, right? Mental health versus mental illness.

I think mental health, we all have, and we all have to maintain. Mental illness is actually a diagnosable condition. However, if we do not manage our mental health and if we do not manage it over a long time and we're progressively stressed or we're progressively not sleeping, there is a very good chance, and we've seen this in research, that that's going to translate to mental illness.

So I also think in the conversation now, we need to be very clear on how we distinguish these because each of them have a very different approach and especially in the workplace in terms of how you can support mental health, preventative mental health, and also ensuring most importantly, that that does not translate to something much more serious—which causes then people to not be able to show up for work; which causes people to be on disability leave; which

causes them to transition perhaps out of work, and then have to transition back into work. And that is the foundation, I would say, for quality of work is having a mentally healthy workforce.

Jeremy: So I want to ask you [about] another piece that came out of the research, which was that 80 percent of those who went on disability or took extended absences attributed their mental health struggles primarily to work, or said that work was worsening pre-existing issues. So I wanted to ask you, Olga, what specific workplace factors are driving this? And are there any surprises in the data?

Olga: Firstly, I wanted to say that more than anything in this research, this was the most shocking to us. Eighty percent of those we surveyed who had been on a short term or long term disability leave or who had been absent from work for more than five days had said that work either was a primary cause of their mental health issue or had exacerbated some other challenge that they had, right?

Because we all have lives and we all have other things going on, but work can actually exacerbate that. So we were so interested in learning more about this, that we actually did another piece of research with the Canadian Standards Association with their public policy unit, where we looked at over 750, 000 reviews from Glassdoor, and these are essentially people reviewing their companies. And we tried to really understand what were the key factors that were impacting employee experience. And of course, employee experience impacts mental health. And there was three of them that I'll talk about.

The first one was bad leadership, right? We learned by looking more into the research that your boss actually has more impact on your mental health than your therapist or your spouse. Can you imagine this?

Jeremy: Wow.

Olga: So, and probably it's not surprising given how much time we spend at work; given how, you know, many of us find purpose and meaning and work. So there really has to be the recognition and possibly training around leadership. Because it impacts entire communities. It impacts entire teams.

The second thing we found that really impacts mental health was low pay. And that's also not surprising. We are in a period and have been where there's been quite a bit of inflation; cost of food, cost of housing, everything's been going up, but wages have remained stagnant in the context of that. So I think there's been a lot of financial stress and that's really impacted mental health. So that's another thing to really kind of keep, keep an eye on, right, is compensation. And that means, obviously, wage, but it also means benefits and making sure that's aligned.

And then the third thing I'll talk about is long hours. And this is again, probably not surprising. People need rest and they need to detach themselves and unplug from work. And I think during the pandemic, and this is perhaps continued, but the remote structure has really blurred the lines between life and work, right? And, and we have email on our phones and we are always connected.

There's been legislation around the right to disconnect. So I think we're making some progress there, but it's also another thing that could really impact how people show up for work because if they're too burnt out, then, then at some point they won't.

Jeremy: Yeah, and one thing I have observed in going to conferences and talking with colleagues and being more actively listening to the conversations in this space on, you know, workforce development, is how people are much more open about their experience with burnout and their experience with the impacts of all of the things that you just talked about. Because I think more and more of us are maybe experiencing this on a much more widespread scale. And so it's kind of like almost forced its way into what we talk about when we talk about work.

Olga: Yeah, absolutely. And again, like all these changes since the pandemic, that's really causing not only new challenges, but it is exacerbating ones that have been there for a long time and just really need to be addressed, right?

And, you know, I think every crisis is an opportunity for change, and it will continue to be a crisis until we actually make meaningful change. Hopefully everything that's been happening, all these conversations we're having at conferences, all this recognition in the workplace that people aren't always doing very well—hopefully that will raise this as a critical issue because a lot of companies don't have this on the radar yet, right? A lot of organizations that we speak to have not made the connection between poor mental health and business outcomes. And I think that's something that really needs to change.

Jeremy: Okay, so let's shift a little bit to what businesses are doing when it comes to quality of work and the rise in workplace mental health programs. Some argue that they haven't significantly improved outcomes. Are we focusing on the wrong solutions? How, how do we measure those outcomes?

Olga: I actually agree with a lot of the research because when we look at mostly mental health and well-being programs, especially like, really the ones that we've seen scale out over the past few years, it's like meditation at work, or yoga at work in the office and these other things. And one of my favorite quotes from somebody we interviewed not too long ago, she said, "You can't yoga yourself out of a terrible work environment," right? So I think what's the biggest mistake is that we are not looking at the systemic factors that are impacting mental health.

And again, these are called the psychosocial risks, right? So bad leadership, you know, all this stuff that I just talked about, workloads, conflict at work; all these other things severely impact mental health, and I don't care how much you put in benefits, and what fancy things you do to benefits. If you are not addressing these, you are not going to have any type of outcome that's impactful.

Jeremy: I'm hearing a lot from you about the critical role of mental health in creating optimal quality of work. And if you could change one thing about the way that businesses approach workplace mental health, what would it be?

Olga: So I think it would be to really identify the root causes of what's happening within the workplace. And you can do that through gathering data or through having conversations and the root causes can be emerging from stuff happening at work, or it could also be emerging from stuff happening at home. And often is because work forces are so diverse, it's going to be a lot of different factors, right?

You know, so maybe John in accounting is going through a divorce and that's causing him a lot of stress, and Mary in finance is going through a lot of financial stress. They might need very

different types of support and it might not always be psychotherapy or drugs that are necessarily going to be best positioned for this, right? Or there might be factors across different teams and departments that are coming out consistently as not good for mental health. And these need to be understood first before you design a program. And once you design a program, you might have to test and, you know, really experiment with a few different types of solutions to address some of these challenges and of course, flexible benefits to compliment all the work that, that you're doing.

In this recent research we did with the Canadian Standards Association, we actually outlined five employers. No, sorry, four employers that have incredible programs, not very expensive, that are tackling these root causes and have seen amazing impact, right? Return on investment; increased retention of staff; increased profitability; because they're a wonderful place to work.

So we now have real data that if you address root causes through effective programming, you as an employer will see the tangible benefit of doing that.

Jeremy: The last thing I wanted to ask you, Olga, is about the work that you're doing with Heal-3 and how the research and the report that we've been talking about, which has been funded by the Future Skills Centre, has led you to some of the things that you're working on right now.

Olga: The one thing I want to say is that the only reason this organization exists and the only reason we're doing this type of work is because of the support we received from the Future Skills Center. We learned a couple of things from that, and that's really kind of the systemic—the need for a systemic approach to mental health; the impact of workplace factors.

So we did a couple of things. First, we set up Heal-3 soon after doing that research, because really we wanted to start to test with organizations. And we've done that with over 50 companies to date, where we diagnose the root cause of poor mental health and well-being, where we test different approaches to really supporting or improving mental health and well-being based on whatever comes out as some of these key factors and really where we start to see some of the impact around this programming.

So we set up the company, but we also did additional research as well. So we received funding from the Canadian Standards Association. They love that report and they really wanted to help us understand what it is within the workplace that impacts mental health and well-being. So we're able to really continue that discovery process and really have a much better understanding of how we can holistically support employees at work, not only through benefits, but also through aligning what we call some of these psychological health and safety factors, these systemic factors that impact mental health and well-being.

Jeremy: Amazing. Olga, thanks so much.

Olga: Thanks, Jeremy.

Jeremy: In this episode, we've heard that improving job quality means looking beyond the basics. Fair wages, leadership, and reasonable workloads all play a role, but so do workplace culture and mental health supports. Employers, policymakers, and workers will all have a part to play in shaping a more sustainable and equitable future of work.

Thanks again for joining us on the Future Skills Podcast, brought to you by the Future Skills Centre. I'd like to thank my guests, Laura McDonough from the Future Skills Centre and Dr. Olga Morawczynski from Heal-3. You can hear all five seasons of the Future Skills Podcast on your favorite podcast app. Give us a follow if you haven't, and stay tuned for the rest of the season. This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Jeremy Strachan. Sound design also by yours truly. Thanks for listening.

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