Impacts of Customization and Wraparound Supports for Digital Skills Upskilling Insights

Executive Summary

There is a critical need to ensure all Canadians have digital skills, but significant barriers remain for some segments of the population. More specifically, women, newcomers and refugees, as well as Black youth face intersecting barriers such as bias, caregiving responsibilities, wage gaps, credential and language challenges, trauma, systemic racism, discrimination and limited networks, all of which restrict access to employment and digital skills development. While digital skills training programs exist, they often emphasize human capital (knowledge, skills and attitudes) alone, and give limited attention to the social and financial capital needed to address barriers along the career pathing journey.

This report examines the role of wraparound supports in digital skills training programs, specifically for women, newcomers and refugees, and Black youth. Informed by an inclusive career pathing framework, these wraparound supports are holistic, flexible services designed to address the unique barriers faced by individuals throughout six stages of their career journey. They do this by 1) encouraging user entry, 2) building self-efficacy, 3) helping individuals navigate careers and systems, 4) assisting with economic and social barriers, 5) providing good content and good teaching, and 6) sustaining support. These stages align with three overarching dimensions of the framework (program access, program completion and employment outcomes), providing a lens for identifying the challenges equity-deserving groups encounter and the supports needed for success.

In addition to helping job seekers meet their human capital needs, wraparound supports seek to support individuals by reducing the personal, financial or logistical barriers that hinder their ability to participate in skills training and the labour market. Examples of these supports include material supports like childcare and financial assistance, and specialized services like mental health counselling and career coaching.

The report draws on the Diversity Institute's Advanced Digital and Professional Training (ADaPT) program as a case study to examine the effectiveness and impact of wraparound supports in digital skills development. Launched in 2014, ADaPT is an employment-focused work-integrated learning program that provides digital skills training and professional development. It offers wraparound services such as transportation support, provision of technological equipment, networking opportunities, career coaching, mentorship and job placements to enable participants to access and complete the program as well as transition into digital and professional careers. It particularly focuses on equity-deserving groups. Since 2020, more than 1,500 participants have completed the program, which has an 80% completion rate, nearly 90% satisfaction and 93% of participants self-identifying as members of equity-deserving groups. ADaPT has also facilitated over 1,300 job placements, exceeding its original target and demonstrating the impact of wraparound supports on both training outcomes and labour market access.

From the literature review and case study analysis, we derived the following recommendations for the societal, organizational and individual levels:

- Societal: Standardize definitions and frameworks for wraparound supports, ensure that wraparound supports are included in programs for equity-deserving groups, and improve coordination across governments, funders, employers, educational institutions and community organizations to align goals, streamline access, strengthen data collection and share best practices.
- Organizational: Ensure that wraparound supports are tailored for equity-deserving groups, leverage multiple funding sources for continuity of supports, enhance cross-program collaboration, engage employers to improve employment outcomes and collect data that assess the impact of supports.
- Individual: Educators, trainers, career counsellors and mentors should provide equitable and inclusive curricula, guidance and mentorship, while learners should actively engage with the process by using resources, seeking feedback, setting career goals and building networks.

KEY INSIGHTS

1 Each stage of the career pathing journey–program access, program completion and employment outcomes–poses unique challenges to women, newcomers and refugees, and Black youth, as well as those with intersectional identities. They pose challenges in part because of the history of oppression, exclusion and disadvantage, which affects confidence as well as social and financial capital.

2 A clear framework grounded in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is needed to guide program providers in setting goals and defining the scope of wraparound supports that address human capital, personal, logistical and labour market access needs.

3 Wraparound supports should integrate key EDI considerations into program design, implementation and evaluation, with appropriate feedback loops to better understand what works for whom and to replicate and scale best practices.

▶ The Issue

While digital skills are in high demand, the digital divide disproportionately affects underemployment and unemployment among equity-deserving groups, including women, newcomers and refugees, and Black youth. Due to social and economic inequalities, these groups face greater difficulties in accessing and completing digital skills training, preventing them from participating in the digital workforce and worsening the economic and social barriers they face.

To address the barriers faced by equity-deserving groups in the career pathing journey, customized wraparound supports must be developed to encourage and sustain participant engagement and ensure training completion, and to strengthen transitions and long-term employment outcomes. However, the definition of wraparound supports is inconsistent across program providers, with some narrowly interpreting wraparound supports as financial aid and others extending them to include tailored forms of assistance. As such, using the career pathing model as a guiding structure, this report lays out a comprehensive framework for identifying the different barriers experienced by equity-deserving groups and the supports needed to address them. It also examines the ADaPT program and its variants as a case study to identify the extent to which tailored wraparound supports can contribute to improved access to digital skills training and employment outcomes for equity-deserving groups.

While many programs provide digital skills training, they rarely address all stages of the career pathway. For women, newcomers and refugees, and Black youth, effective support must extend beyond technical skills training to 1) encourage user entry, 2) build self-efficacy, 3) support participants in navigating careers and systems, 4) assist with economic and social barriers, 5) provide good content and good teaching, and 6) sustain support. For example, gender and racial stereotypes can discourage women or Black individuals from even entering digital skills training, while language and wayfinding may be a barrier for newcomers and refugees. These factors also influence self-efficacy and the belief in one's ability to succeed.

🔧 What We Investigated

This report examines the digital skills barriers faced by three groups—women, newcomers and refugees, and Black youth—and the role of wraparound supports in addressing their needs.

Drawing on research as well as data from different variants of the ADaPT program, including ADaPT for Newcomers, ADaPT for Career Changers, ADaPT for Black Youth, and the ADaPT4Success program, this report examines the different approaches to wraparound supports and their implications for further research.

Specifically, it asks the following questions:

- What barriers do women, newcomers and refugees, and Black youth face along the career pathing journey?
- How can wraparound supports be effectively designed to meet these needs?

✔️ What We're Learning

Our examination of barriers using the career pathing model found that women, newcomers and refugees, and Black youth face challenges before, during and after program participation, necessitating a step-by-step exploration of the needs that must be addressed to facilitate better engagement, as well as learning and employment outcomes.

At the program access stage, equity-deserving groups may be hesitant to pursue skills training due to caregiving responsibilities and cost, as well as discrimination, which leads to a lack of self-efficacy. Similar factors that limit access to programs also hinder completion, including low self-efficacy. Socioeconomic factors such as the digital divide, transport poverty and financial insecurity further constrain participants' ability to fully engage in and complete digital skills programs. At the employment stage, equity-deserving groups may struggle to sustain support after program completion due to a lack of professional networks and social capital.

Wraparound supports offer holistic, flexible and tailored services to address these barriers. In practice, wraparound supports must address four interconnected needs along the career pathing journey. These include human capital needs, such as providing language training or resources for newcomers that complement the core training received. Wraparound supports must also respond to personal needs. These supports can be offered via mental health support and networking opportunities as well as mentorship and sponsorship initiatives, which can help improve self-efficacy and belonging. Logistical supports provide access to childcare, transportation, financial assistance and technology so that participants can fully engage in training. Finally, labour market access supports such as career counselling and employment placements facilitate the transition into meaningful and sustained employment outcomes.

Key considerations for integrating EDI into wraparound supports include assessing diverse needs, addressing underserved populations and embedding EDI principles like accessibility and cultural sensitivity into program design. Program developers should also consider engaging with inclusive employers to support participants' transition into the workplace and coordination among service providers, community organizations and employers to streamline available resources for participants. To measure the progress of their services, robust evaluation metrics and outcome measures must be incorporated to capture both implementation and impact.

The ADaPT program exemplifies how wraparound supports can effectively meet the needs of participants in skills training programs. Recognizing that a "one-size-fits-all" approach does not work for everyone, different ADaPT streams have provided targeted support to help participants overcome specific program and societal barriers and successfully transition into the workforce. For example, ADaPT for Black Youth facilitated access to critical resources such as loaner computers and internet connectivity. The ADaPT for Newcomers variant conducted ecosystem mapping to identify and validate community organizations and resources that could support participants in their resettlement.

Since the program's establishment, ADaPT has created pathways into various professional and digital careers for individuals from diverse backgrounds. Since 2020, over 1,500 participants have completed the program, surpassing its original target of 975 participant completions by 60%. Of those 1,500 participants, 94% identified as having diverse backgrounds. The program completion rate stands at 80%, with a satisfaction rate of 89%.

Over 1,000 employers have engaged with the program, and ADaPT has ensured job placements for 1,305 participants, which surpassed the original target of 1,239 placements by 5%. Furthermore, employers have seen tangible benefits from engaging with the program, with over 85% reporting improved business outcomes such as increased employee retention and greater workforce diversity.

The findings suggest that when the barriers are clearly understood and addressed through customized wraparound supports, digital skills programs can expand opportunities for equity-deserving groups and contribute to more inclusive participation in the digital economy.

⭐ Why It Matters

Strengthening wraparound supports is essential to ensuring the participation of equity-deserving groups in the digital economy. For consistency and effectiveness, clear definitions of wraparound supports should also be established and standardized. An aggregated database of supports and programs should also be made publicly available and accessible for participants. Furthermore, building public-private partnerships between employers, educational institutions and community organizations is critical to delivering integrated wraparound supports. Federal, provincial and municipal governments should also leverage their partnerships with community donors to streamline program access and improve awareness of available programs.

Key stakeholders at the organizational level should develop tailored wraparound supports that incorporate inclusive and accessible program design. Organizations should also establish sustainable financing and work with employer partners to facilitate user navigation across programs and supports. Employer engagement is also essential to providing participants with professional experience in the form of job placements, internships and work-integrated learning opportunities. To ensure that programs are effectively supporting participants, organizations should clearly define their goals and develop evaluation frameworks to track their progress and inform the improvement of programs.

Promising practices can also be employed at the individual level by educators and trainers, career counsellors, mentors, and learners and trainees. Educators and trainers should be equipped with the knowledge and tools to deliver accessible, inclusive support and adapt curricula to reflect learners' diverse backgrounds and needs. Career counsellors can provide personalized, culturally responsive guidance while promoting access to resources and networks. Mentors should share industry knowledge, help trainees build connections, and strengthen their ability to support mentees through EDI training. Learners and trainees, in turn, can contribute by engaging actively in training, setting career goals and building networks.
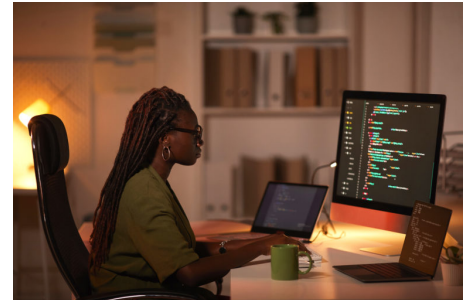
**State of Skills:
Digital Tools in the Skills Ecosystem**

There is considerable promise in the role digital tools and virtual career services can play in improving access to training and career development, particularly for those with geographic barriers or constraints such as family care or other work responsibilities.

Read Thematic Report

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

How to Cite This Report

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