

Project Insights Report

Responsive Career Pathways Project (RCP) Midcareer Transitions



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Executive Summary

Canada's rapidly changing labour market is challenging both workers and employers to adapt. Automation, demographic shifts and evolving skill demands mean that many mid-career Canadians will need to retrain or transition into new roles, while small and midsize enterprises (SMEs) struggle to recruit and retain skilled staff. Yet Canada's employment and training systems largely serve the unemployed, leaving employed or precariously employed adults without accessible support to navigate change.

The Mid-Career Transitions Project, led by the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology (MITT) and Douglas College, set out to close this gap. Phase 1 (February–May 2023) conducted a national needs assessment using surveys, interviews and literature review to examine the experiences of mid-career workers and SMEs. It found that workers need confidence-building and career navigation supports as much as technical training, while SMEs require practical tools and advisory services to plan workforce development. These insights confirmed the need for new, “dual-client” service models that serve both groups simultaneously.

Phase 2 (April–November 2023) co-designed and tested two prototypes with participants across Manitoba and British Columbia. Both models—one focused on personalized coaching, the other on group workshops—proved highly effective. Over 90% of participants reported increased confidence and readiness to pursue career transitions, and strong trust-based relationships with career development practitioners were key to success.

The project demonstrates that Canada needs more flexible, user-centred and integrated approaches to lifelong learning. Embedding coaching and self-efficacy supports into training, expanding access for underrepresented groups, and linking career services with employer engagement can strengthen resilience in a transforming economy. These lessons provide a practical blueprint for policymakers, educators and employers seeking to modernize how Canada supports working adults and SMEs in an era of continuous change.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Across both prototypes, over 90% of participants reported greater confidence and readiness to navigate career transitions, which demonstrates that flexible, personalized supports can significantly improve mid-career workers' outcomes.
- 2 The project showed that Canada's workforce development ecosystem remains fragmented, and that integrating "dual-client" models serving both workers and SMEs is essential for closing systemic gaps between career services and employer capacity-building.
- 3 Embedding one-on-one coaching and practitioner feedback loops throughout program delivery proved critical for participant engagement, continuous model improvement and sustained employer interest.

The Issue

Canada's labour market is undergoing profound disruption driven by automation, digitalization, demographic shifts and the continuing impacts of the pandemic. More Canadians than ever will change jobs or sectors multiple times in their working lives. By some estimates, one in sixteen workers may need to change occupations by 2030. Yet the country's systems for learning and employment have not evolved to meet this new reality. Traditional employment services were built around a linear model where people learn before they work and seek help only after losing employment. This "fail-first" approach leaves a large gap for those who are already employed but need to upskill, re-skill or transition to new roles while remaining in the workforce.

Mid-career workers, a substantial share of Canada's workforce, sit at the centre of this gap. They are often balancing familial and financial responsibilities while facing technological and structural change that threatens their job stability. Many experience low confidence in their ability to navigate transitions, limited time and resources to pursue training, and difficulty accessing supports that are relevant to their situation. These barriers are especially acute for immigrant workers, who frequently struggle to transfer credentials and professional experience into the Canadian context, as well as for women and those in precarious or transforming industries.

At the same time, SMEs, which make up 99.7% of all Canadian businesses and employ over half of the national workforce, face parallel challenges. SMEs are on the front lines of labour shortages and rapid technological change but often lack the capacity, resources and expertise to engage in long-term workforce planning or employee development. Many are forced to respond reactively to hiring challenges rather than proactively investing in training and retention. Limited access to labour market data, unclear pathways to upskilling programs, and uncertainty about the return on investment from training all contribute to this skills mismatch.

These intersecting issues reveal a deeper systems gap: Canada lacks a coordinated mechanism for connecting the needs of working adults with the workforce development needs of employers. The absence of this “third pillar” in the country’s learning ecosystem—skills development and career services for working-age, employed Canadians—leaves both workers and businesses without adequate support to adapt to change.

The consequences are already visible. Workers seeking greater fulfillment and stability struggle to find accessible, relevant learning opportunities, while employers face persistent difficulties attracting and retaining skilled talent. Without new, collaborative approaches to career development that serve both sides of the labour market, these problems will continue to erode productivity, equity and resilience in Canada’s economy.

By addressing the structural disconnect between mid-career workers and SMEs, this project responds to an urgent national challenge: building a system of lifelong learning and career mobility that supports Canadians to thrive and helps businesses stay competitive in a rapidly changing world.



What We Investigated

Phase 1 (February–May 2023): Needs assessment

The first phase set out to understand how Canada could better support mid-career workers and SMEs in adapting to rapid labour-market change. The project explored how career services and training systems could evolve to help working adults navigate transitions without leaving the workforce. Phase 1 was guided by five key research questions:

1. What are mid-career workers' motivations and challenges related to career transitions?
2. What are SME employers' priorities, goals and challenges related to workforce development?
3. What supports do mid-career workers and SME employers need to address their challenges?
4. Is there an opportunity to design and test dual-client service models that address the needs of both groups?

To answer these questions, researchers conducted a mixed-methods needs assessment using online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with mid-career workers and SME employers across Canada. Over 100 participants across Canada shared their experiences with job transitions, training participation and workforce development challenges. Data were collected and analyzed by Blueprint in partnership with MITT and Douglas College.

A complementary literature and environmental scan examined automation, demographic change and emerging skill requirements, along with best practices in career guidance and adult learning. Together, these methods produced a detailed picture of the systemic gaps faced by both mid-career workers and SMEs, confirming the need for more flexible and scalable service models.

Phase 2 (April–November 2023): Co-design and prototype testing

Building on Phase 1 findings, the second phase tested two prototype service models designed to meet the dual needs of workers and employers. Phase 2 asked the following:

1. Who were the participants?
2. What service components did participants engage in? (For the MITT model only.)
3. Did the service model meet participants' career transition support needs, and how satisfied were they with the model?
4. What early outcomes did participants achieve (e.g., improved confidence, motivation or mindset, or readiness to navigate career transitions)?
5. What implementation conditions, practitioner assets and resource requirements are needed to deliver these models effectively?
6. What improvements or iterations would enhance future delivery and scalability?

MITT and Douglas College engaged 77 mid-career workers, including immigrants, women and full-time employees from varied sectors. MITT's model emphasized personalized, one-on-one coaching and flexible "exit-when-ready" delivery in Winnipeg, while Douglas College's model in Greater Vancouver featured group workshops, individualized counselling and online learning modules.

Blueprint led the evaluation, integrating surveys, interviews, focus groups and co-iteration workshops with both participants and career development practitioners. Intake and exit data measured satisfaction and outcomes, while practitioner debriefs captured implementation lessons and scalability considerations.

This dual-phase approach, starting with a needs assessment and progressing to prototype testing, ensured the models were evidence-based and user-driven. By centring both mid-career workers and SMEs, the project aimed to bridge the systemic divide between employees' career development needs and employers' capacity to support them, advancing a more integrated, responsive model of lifelong learning and workforce planning.

What We're Learning

Phase 1 (February–May 2023): Needs assessment

Mid-career workers want to grow but lack accessible, relevant and confidence-building supports

Survey and interview data showed that many employed adults were motivated to improve their careers but felt uncertain about where to start. Participants reported limited time, money and awareness of credible programs, and many expressed low confidence in their ability to navigate change. Immigrant and racialized workers, in particular, cited credential-recognition barriers and difficulty translating past experience into new opportunities. These findings confirmed that mid-career workers often fall between the cracks of Canada's existing employment and training systems.

SMEs face workforce pressures but lack capacity for structured planning and training

Employers consistently identified recruitment and retention challenges, particularly for specialized and technical roles. Most SME respondents said they did not have a dedicated HR function or resources to forecast skill needs. Instead, they relied on informal, short-term hiring practices. Even when owners recognized the value of training, many were unsure how to access funding or design development plans. The assessment found strong employer interest in practical tools and advisory services that help them plan for future workforce needs.

Workers and employers see value in flexible, practical and personalized approaches

Both groups emphasized that any effective solution must be easy to access, low-cost and adaptable to busy schedules. Workers preferred shorter, modular learning options focused on "core skills" such as adaptability, communication and problem solving. Employers wanted turnkey resources—including templates, workshops and coaching—that fit their limited time. The convergence of these preferences highlighted a shared appetite for more responsive and customizable career-development supports.

Confidence and career-navigation skills are as critical as technical upskilling

A key insight was that many mid-career participants were not only seeking new competencies but also psychological readiness to transition. Self-efficacy, goal-setting and awareness of transferable skills emerged as major determinants of whether workers pursued training or new jobs. This points to the importance of embedding career confidence-building and navigation supports within future programs.

Canada needs an integrated dual-client model that serves both workers and SMEs simultaneously

Findings from 25 interviews and two national surveys revealed that current services treat workers and employers as separate audiences, creating inefficiencies and missed opportunities for alignment. The research demonstrated that a joint model linking career coaching for individuals with workforce-planning tools for SMEs could better match skill supply and demand. This evidence provided the foundation for Phase 2, where prototypes of such dual-client models were co-designed and tested in real-world settings.

Phase 2 (April–November 2023): Co-design and prototype testing

Prototyping validated the need for flexible, human-centred supports that blend structure with personalization

Across both pilot sites, 77 mid-career participants—47 at Douglas College and 30 at MITT—tested two service models over six to twelve weeks. Both prototypes proved that combining group workshops, one-on-one counselling and self-directed resources can help mid-career adults build confidence, clarify goals and act on transitions. Douglas College respondents showed satisfaction rates of 84%–96% with workshop components; MITT respondents rated service components between 90% and 100%.

Participants reported stronger confidence, clarity and motivation to manage career transitions

Among Douglas College participants, 84% said the program improved their understanding of their own career needs, 80% felt more capable of making informed career decisions, and 80% gained confidence to take next steps. MITT participants reported even higher outcomes, as 95% said the program increased their confidence and 90% said it improved their decision-making.

Across both models, respondents described reframing uncertainty as opportunity, developing personalized action plans and regaining a sense of control over their careers.

Trust-based relationships with career development practitioners were central to positive outcomes

At Douglas College, 92% of respondents used one-on-one counselling, with 95% saying it offered personalized guidance and a safe, supportive environment. MITT participants echoed this, with 100% reporting that the services created a positive, encouraging space and 100% describing strong relationships with career development practitioners. Practitioners emphasized empathy, cultural competence and strengths-based coaching—especially critical for immigrants navigating credential and language barriers.

Participants and career development practitioners identified opportunities to strengthen the models

Douglas College participants recommended richer labour market information, more in-person sessions, longer workshops and post-program follow-ups. MITT participants requested stronger employer engagement, more networking opportunities, and supports related to professional branding and financial literacy. Career development practitioners in both institutions noted that the limited time for one-on-one support and follow-ups constrained their ability to track action plans.

The dual-client model shows promise for scaling integrated workforce services

Both prototypes demonstrated how flexible, user-driven models can align worker and employer needs. Participants valued practical, applied learning and personalized coaching that built career self-efficacy and resilience. Career development practitioners saw potential to extend the approach through self-guided tools and scalable learning management systems platforms, laying the groundwork for future phases that will deepen employer involvement and measure longer-term outcomes in 2024–2025.

Why It Matters

Canada's workforce is experiencing unprecedented disruption driven by rapid technological change, automation, demographic shifts and post-pandemic restructuring. Millions of workers, especially those in mid-career, must now adapt to evolving skill demands or transition into entirely new roles. Yet the country's employment and training systems remain largely reactive, designed for job seekers who are unemployed rather than for employed or precariously employed workers seeking to stay ahead of change. SMEs, which employ over half of Canadian workers, face parallel challenges. Many lack the capacity, resources or tools to plan for their future skill needs. The Mid-Career Transitions Project provides critical insights into how to bridge this system gap—informing policies and practices that will shape the future of workforce resilience in Canada.

The project revealed that mid-career workers need more than technical training—they need confidence, career navigation skills and personalized guidance to envision and act on new pathways. Across both pilot sites, over 90% of participants said that personalized coaching helped them clarify goals, build confidence and increase readiness for change. These findings challenge the conventional design of upskilling programs, which often emphasize credential attainment over behavioural and motivational supports. For practitioners, the key insight is that career development is both cognitive and emotional, as workers must see themselves as capable of growth before they can pursue it. Future workforce programs should embed coaching, reflection and self-efficacy components alongside skill instruction.

Phase 1 highlighted that immigrant, racialized and women workers encounter overlapping barriers to advancement, including lack of credential recognition, limited access to employer-sponsored training, and time or financial constraints. Phase 2 demonstrated that culturally responsive career counselling and flexible, modular learning formats can help mitigate these barriers. For example, immigrants in the MITT prototype reported feeling “seen and supported” through one-on-one coaching that valued their prior experience. This suggests that inclusive design that tailors services to lived experience is a critical ingredient in supporting equitable career transitions. Policymakers and training providers should therefore invest in interventions that combine accessibility (e.g., flexible delivery, online options) with personalization (e.g., targeted coaching, language-sensitive supports).



State of Skills: Better Labour Market Transitions for Mid-Career Workers

Supporting displaced mid-career workers requires a clear understanding of the barriers and difficulties they face, and it should also seek to build on highly valued skills developed through years of work and life experience.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

SMEs remain the backbone of the Canadian economy, yet Phase 1 confirmed that most operate without formal HR or workforce planning functions. This limits their ability to forecast skill needs or participate in training initiatives. The project's employer consultations revealed that SMEs value practical, time-efficient supports—such as planning templates, curated training information and advisory workshops—over generic policy guidance. These findings imply that future SME-focused interventions should shift from awareness-raising to applied, hands-on support.

Governments and industry associations could scale impact by embedding workforce planning tools within local business service networks or chambers of commerce, ensuring SMEs can access practical support without additional administrative burden.

Moreover, a defining lesson of the project is that career and workforce development are two sides of the same coin. Current federal and provincial systems treat workers and employers as separate clients, creating duplication and inefficiency. The success of MITT's and Douglas College's dual-client prototypes demonstrates that integrating these perspectives can produce better outcomes for both. This has direct implications for policy and funding: career and employment services could evolve from single-client to multi-client models that pair individual career coaching with employer engagement. Such alignment would make Canada's workforce system more agile in responding to rapid economic change, whether related to automation, the green transition or population mobility.

The project's iterative approach, beginning with a national needs assessment and evolving into co-designed prototypes, offers a blueprint for scaling innovation responsibly. Blueprint's evaluation framework, which combined surveys, interviews and practitioner feedback, showed that continuous learning between researchers, practitioners and participants is vital to refining interventions. This learning model can guide governments and funders toward adaptive policy frameworks that evolve in real time, informed by evidence rather than fixed program designs.

Canada's economy faces simultaneous challenges—labour shortages, an aging workforce, housing pressures and the transition to a low-carbon economy. Each of these trends requires workers who can pivot between roles, sectors and technologies. The Mid-Career Transitions Project shows that readiness for such change is built through confidence, connection and competence. By creating pathways for working adults to adapt *without* exiting the labour market, this project advances a national vision of lifelong learning that supports productivity, equity and inclusion.

Governments, workforce boards, postsecondary institutions and industry associations all have a stake in this learning. Policymakers can use these insights to design integrated funding models that link career services with SME workforce development. Employers can adapt elements of the prototypes to strengthen retention and employee growth. Furthermore, educators and career development practitioners can embed flexible, learner-centred design principles into new training and re-skilling programs.

Ultimately, this project reinforces that successful transitions depend on systems that meet people where they are—workers with diverse experiences, employers with limited capacity and practitioners bridging the two. Together, the two project phases demonstrate that integrated, user-centred and relationship-based approaches that serve both workers and employers simultaneously are essential for building a more agile and inclusive skills ecosystem. Canada’s future prosperity depends on scaling such models nationally, ensuring that every worker and business can adapt and thrive amid the changing world of work.

► What's Next

A final project report released in November 2025, will capture the adaptations made to both models through 2024–2025. As new worker cohorts participate, additional insights will emerge, and refinements will be made in response to participant and practitioner feedback. Employer engagement for both MITT and Douglas College gained momentum throughout 2024 and continued to expand in 2025. The partners will keep exploring outcomes for both worker and employer streams, examining how results evolve as the models are iterated. Project assets, including training materials, career coaching tools and employer resources, remain in active use and continue to inform ongoing delivery and scale-up planning.

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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