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Project Insights Report

Thriving Workplaces: A Dual-Client Approach to Career Services

PARTNERS
MixtMode
Canadian Career Development Foundation

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Nova Scotia

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Executive Summary

The Thriving Workplaces initiative, led by MixtMode Consulting, the Canadian Career Development Foundation and Blueprint, is testing an innovative dual-client model for career services in Nova Scotia. The project, implemented by five Nova Scotia Works employment service providers, aims to improve employment outcomes by engaging both work seekers and employers in structured career navigation activities.

Between April and November 2024, the project enrolled 44 work seekers and 15 employers. Participants used the Magnetic Factors framework, a research-based set of variables that either attract employers and work seekers to one another or repel them. Findings suggest that while the model improves career readiness and employer engagement, challenges remain in scaling participation and deepening employer involvement.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Eighty-five percent of employment service practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident in their ability to implement Thriving Workplaces and use the Magnetic Factors framework, and the same proportion agreed or strongly agreed that they had the knowledge needed to do so.

2. Work seekers and employers valued the Magnetic Factors framework, reporting increased confidence and clarity in job searches and hiring expectations.

3. Service providers saw improved collaboration between employer engagement specialists and case managers, but initial recruitment challenges slowed employer participation.

The Issue

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: increased automation, the rise of the gig economy, the pandemic and climate change, to name a few. 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.

Compared to adults from other jurisdictions, Canadian workers are not actively using career services, and those who are aware of these services struggle to access them due to the restrictive eligibility criteria of our "fail first" model. On the employer side, small and midsize 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.

Many employment service models prioritize quick job placements but fail to address the deeper issues of job retention and employer–work seeker alignment. In Nova Scotia, small businesses face persistent hiring and retention challenges, while job seekers struggle with uncertainty about career expectations and alignment. These challenges are particularly pronounced for individuals who have been unemployed for extended periods, including those from equity-deserving groups.

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.



What We Investigated

The Thriving Workplaces project designs and tests new approaches to skills development and career services and generates evidence to inform how Canada's learning ecosystem can better support working adults. The project seeks to help both work seekers and employers clarify their needs, increasing the likelihood of better employment matches and long-term job retention.

Supported by evaluation partner Blueprint, the project also includes the Canadian Career Development Foundation, MixtMode, the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology, the Training Group at Douglas College and the Nova Scotia departments of Labour, Skills and Immigration and Economic Development.

The initial discovery phase of the project focused on systematically researching the needs of small businesses and workers across Nova Scotia, and engaging workforce development stakeholders to assess the strengths and opportunities for innovation in the existing service ecosystem. This phase included one-on-one interviews, pre-session conversations and small-group interviews with workers, SMEs and service providers, as well as reviews of research on employer and worker needs.

In the second phase of the project, the project partners came together for a two-day working session to collectively review the key data and findings from the discovery phase and generate ideas for service innovation based on the findings. This session produced a road map of interconnected service innovation opportunities that build toward the vision of a dual-client service model in employment services in Canada that operates in an integrated manner with small businesses and workers to help them thrive. This road map guided the co-design and testing of an intervention that focused on strengthening the “workplace bargain”—the active, ongoing and intentional negotiation between small businesses and workers as they strive to establish a thriving workplace experience.

The developed model focuses on building clarity, awareness and alignment for workers and employers around the Magnetic Factors—meaning and values; skills and competencies; workplace culture; growth; working arrangements; pay and benefits; inclusion and belonging; and external conditions. The underlying theory for the model is that by helping work seekers and employers gain clarity on their needs and offerings related to the Magnetic Factors and apply this clarity in their workforce and career journeys, both parties can achieve more suitable employment matches, job retention and ultimately a thriving workplace. The developed model applies a common approach to exploring needs, wants and offerings for work seekers and employers via a Magnetic Factors workbook and activities. It provides a common language to inform actions and interactions through job search, hiring strategy, job matching and interviews.

The latest project phase includes evaluation to understand how well the Magnetic Factors framework supports both job seekers and employers in making informed career and hiring decisions. Researchers used a mixed-methods approach that included surveys, focus groups, site visits and practitioner reflection journals. The research captured participant experiences and program outcomes across five service providers in Nova Scotia. The study sought to determine whether work seekers gained clarity in their job expectations, how employers refined their hiring strategies and what barriers existed to broader program participation.

What We’re Learning

Workers and SMEs in Nova Scotia continue to face challenges
Twenty-three small-business workers and 29 small-business employers participated in the discovery phase, along with Nova Scotia Works service providers, the Nova Scotia Career Development Association, the Centre for Employment Innovation, the Association of Industry Sector Councils and individual sector councils. Many small businesses were struggling to find and keep the workforces they needed. Workers, particularly those from equity-deserving groups, continue to face challenges in finding workplace opportunities that align with their needs and goals. Employment service providers and other stakeholders are eager to help address this dilemma but need more tools and capacity-building opportunities to do this work effectively.

Iterative implementation of the model will provide a foundation for future success
The first step in implementing the model was to experiment with various ways to enhance work seekers' and employers' clarity and awareness, and to translate that clarity into actionable next steps in their career and workforce journeys. To support this experimentation, partners developed a resource hub and partner portal for practitioners, held a four-day session with practitioners to introduce them to the model and framework, held regular check-ins with practitioners and conducted site visits. Most practitioners felt confident in their ability to implement the model after training. However, some expressed concerns about remembering all the steps in the model and maintaining project momentum during periods of staff turnover. Regular check-ins and site visits helped address these concerns and ensure ongoing support. The early focus on experimentation with the framework forms a solid foundation from which to measure participant outcomes going forward.

Early evidence demonstrates the utility of the Magnetic Factors framework
Participants reported greater confidence and clearer insights into career priorities, particularly in understanding workplace culture, skill utilization and work-life balance. Employers found the Magnetic Factors framework helpful in defining hiring expectations, though many required additional support to articulate their workplace culture and non-financial job benefits. Only one job match was recorded, because the project was still in the early phases of experimentation. That said, practitioners observed stronger employer–job seeker relationships, suggesting long-term potential for better employment alignment.

Why It Matters

With growing uncertainty from changes to international trade relations and cooperation, accelerating development of artificial intelligence and changes spurred by Canada's transition to a low-carbon economy, the labour market will continue to be dynamic and volatile in the coming years. Now, more than ever, workers need the right supports to navigate career pathways and transition between jobs and sectors as smoothly as possible. Given our aging workforce and evolving immigration policies, Canadian employers cannot afford to have workers idle.

This project highlights the challenges of streamlining these pathways. Streamlining requires extensive collaboration across actors; time and resources to understand the needs of those actors; and the technical expertise to iterate a new approach at multiple sites. The full scope of work required to develop and test something new requires a multi-year commitment from funders and project stakeholders but results in high-quality evidence to support what works for whom and why.



State of Skills: Effective Employer Engagement in Skills Development: From Rhetoric to Solutions

Supporting employers in overcoming structural barriers to training investment is key to addressing labour and skill shortages.

Read Thematic Report

While these findings are particularly relevant in Nova Scotia's labour market, they are relevant to other jurisdictions across Canada. Many small businesses struggle to attract and retain qualified talent, and job seekers—especially those from equity-deserving backgrounds—often face barriers in finding stable, fulfilling work. Policymakers should continue to monitor the progress of this project, as future evaluation results will support whether the model developed holds potential for other jurisdictions with similar challenges.

What's Next

The next phase of this project will focus on refining employer engagement strategies, expanding the Magnetic Factors model and testing different service delivery methods to ensure broader accessibility. Future efforts will include scaling the model within the Nova Scotia Works system, collecting longer-term employment and retention data and enhancing employer awareness of the Magnetic Factors approach to further strengthen job matches.

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.

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