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Canadian
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POLICY BRIEF

From Disruption to Resilience: The Case for a National Career Development Strategy

Canada needs a system that helps people prepare for workforce disruption, not simply respond to it. *The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) is calling on the Government of Canada to work with provinces and territories, employers, educators, Indigenous partners, and the career development sector to establish a* ***National Career Development Strategy****.*

Canada is grappling with growing workforce disruption. The rise of artificial intelligence, trade uncertainty, and other economic trends are creating risk and uncertainty for workers and employers and exacerbating existing challenges. Canada's overall productivity, and productivity growth, continue to lag behind other OECD countries, nearly 1 in 4 unemployed Canadians have been out of work for over 6 months, and youth unemployment remains at some of the highest levels in over two decades (excluding peak COVID-19 years).[i] [ii] [iii]

In the face of these worsening pressures, Canada's longstanding approach to employment services is no longer meeting the moment. Many services are not available until after someone has already become disconnected from the workforce, leaving most Canadians without support as they navigate career transitions, emerging skill demands, or changing labour market conditions.

Even when people do access services, the system often relies on a "one size fits all," "jobs first" model that prioritizes rapid placement over career readiness. This approach overlooks the reality that individuals may first need support to understand their options, build confidence, identify transferable skills, or determine an appropriate pathway. While these needs are especially acute for those experiencing long term unemployment, they are not limited to them.

There is, however, a proven and underleveraged tool that can complement and strengthen our existing systems: career development can reach people where they are and equip them to navigate an increasingly complex and changing world of work – before, during and after periods of disruption.

Decades of research have demonstrated that high-quality career development leads to improved learning and employment outcomes, strengthened career management skills, and improved alignment between people and jobs.

What is career development?

Career development is the lifelong process of managing learning and work transitions. It is about much more than helping someone find a job. It attends to both the supply and demand sides of the labour market, focused on helping both employers and workers find sustainable attachment. It helps work seekers and workers understand their skills, values, interests and goals, make informed decisions about education and training, identify opportunities, and navigate transitions throughout their working lives. It helps employers to understand their needs and offerings to support stronger recruitment, onboarding, and retention. In this way, it strengthens connections between workers and employers by helping to align skills and experience with workforce needs.

- A seminal OECD review found that career development has positive impacts on learning and job acquisition and job fit.[iv] There is also considerable evidence that it helps individuals commit to and complete learning, increase awareness of their skills, build career management capabilities, strengthen social connections, and ease transitions in and out of learning and work.[v]
- CCDF's In Motion & Momentum+ (IM&M+) career readiness program has demonstrated measurable gains over conventional employment services. A randomized controlled trial found that employment increased by **30 percentage points among IM&M+ participants in the 12 months following intake, compared with a 19-percentage-point increase among those receiving conventional public employment services (PES)**. It also improved earnings ($4,400 more than those in conventional PES), foundational employability outcomes, and employment hope.
- Another randomized controlled trial on the impacts of career development intervention for high school students found positive effects on post-secondary enrollment and graduation, with impacts persisting into adulthood. Participants ultimately had income levels 10% higher than those who had not participated.[vi]

These outcomes translate into broader economic benefits, including increased labour market participation, improved productivity and labour market efficiency, as well as increased tax revenues and reduced reliance on government benefits. [vii viii ix x]

Canada Has the Puzzle Pieces – What's Missing is a Coordinated Approach

Canada already has much of the infrastructure needed to build a stronger and more resilient workforce. The career development sector includes an estimated 50,000 practitioners working in a range of public and private settings, including the K-12 and post-secondary education systems and publicly funded employment services. [xi] However, availability of quality career development support remains uneven across regions and populations, particularly among equity-deserving groups. [xii]

Significant progress has been made in establishing competency standards and national certification in the career development sector. [xiii] However, the skills and capacity of career development professionals vary, driven in large part by limited investment in training and professional development opportunities. [xiv]

Canada does not need to start from scratch. It needs to connect, strengthen, and expand what already exists. Moving toward a workforce development and employment services system that is ready to meet the moment requires three important shifts in approach:

- **Career development is not a replacement for traditional employment and skills programs – it is a necessary and complementary component of sustainable workforce development.** Skills development helps people acquire new capabilities, while career development helps them understand which capabilities they need, where those skills can take them, how their existing skills can transfer, and which pathway makes sense for them.
- **Career development is a powerful tool to prepare for and proactively address disruption, not just a responsive mechanism for individuals who are already navigating workforce detachment.** [xv] The current "fail first" approach limits access for Canadians who are underemployed, economically vulnerable, or at risk of displacement. It also contributes to lower career services access rates than many peer countries; a 2020 study revealed that only 19% of Canadian adults had used career services in the last five years, compared to an average of 39% across other OECD countries. [xvi]
- **Career readiness is a real and growing need in today's labour market, and effective career development can meet people where they are and prepare them to succeed.** Canadians have different needs at different stages of their careers. A young person entering the workforce needs help to understand career pathways and how their skills connect to emerging opportunities. Adults experiencing long-term unemployment need targeted services to rebuild confidence, identify pathways, and strengthen readiness. Workers navigating mid-career transitions need assistance to identify transferable skills and understand how those skills could translate before displacement occurs. Career development is purpose-built to assess needs and provide targeted support.

Building on these pillars, Canada needs a coordinated roadmap to expand access to high-quality career development services across the lifespan, strengthen pre-employment supports, and prepare workers to anticipate and address labour market disruption.

A National Career Development Strategy would not mean creating a single national service or replacing existing programs. Rather, it would provide a **shared framework for connecting and strengthening the systems Canada already has** – aligning federal, provincial and territorial systems around shared standards, building sector capacity, and supporting evidence-based interventions that strengthen workforce resilience and participation.

Our Recommendation

The Government of Canada work with provinces and territories, employers, educators, Indigenous partners, communities, the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) and its sectoral partners to establish a **National Career Development Strategy** that:

- builds proactive access to career development and pre-employment support;

- strengthens school-to-work transitions and youth career readiness;
- improves pathways back to work for Canadians experiencing long-term unemployment;
- supports employers in navigating recruitment, onboarding, and retention in today's labour market context;
- strengthens the capacity, professionalization and evidence base of Canada's career development sector;
- supports lifelong reskilling, upskilling and career transitions;
- improves connection between workers, employers, education and training systems.

This strategy should be developed, implemented and overseen by a **Career Services Modernization Task Force**, with participation from federal, provincial and territorial governments, Indigenous partners, employers, educators, career development professionals, and community organizations.

Canada has the supports, expertise and innovations to build on. Now it needs to connect them into a coordinated system that helps Canadians prepare for change - from their first career decision through every transition that follows.

This is the first in a series of briefs highlighting the need for a coordinated approach to career development and career readiness in Canada. Future instalments will focus on specific pillars and populations to be considered in the context of a ***National Career Development Strategy****, including young people and individuals experiencing long-term unemployment.*

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