

SKILLS FOR THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD ∴ MAY 2021

Building Inclusive Workplaces

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Skills for the Post-Pandemic World tackles key questions facing policymakers, employers, training providers and workers. It is urgent that society turns to face the fundamental changes in the labour market precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and many players must rise to meet the new conditions of a post-pandemic world.

Society will slowly reopen and business will resume, but there will be no “return” to normal: the pandemic has dragged the future of work into the present. Digitization, work from home, plus other steepened trajectories and intensified shifts well documented in the future-of-work discourse are here now, and likely to stay.

Building on the collaborative success of the **Skills Next** series, the Public Policy Forum (PPF) and the Diversity Institute (DI), funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), and with new support from Microsoft, join once more to face these rapid societal shifts head-on, with research looking at the future of skills, training and retraining in ways that will chart a path forward as the pandemic continues to unfold.

The goal of this series is to build a robust policy ecosystem that supports the mobility needed for workers and employers to navigate the new reality. To do this, we examine eight key topics:

1. **Job polarization in Canada: Skills for the post-pandemic world**
2. **Digital infrastructure for the post-pandemic world**
3. **New working arrangements**
4. **Building inclusive workplaces**
5. **Immigration and the success of Canada’s post-pandemic economy**
6. **Innovation in post-secondary education**
7. **The mother of invention: Skills for innovation in the post-pandemic world**
8. **Supporting entrepreneurship and SMEs**

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Canada 

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FOREWORD

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR MORE INCLUSIVE WORKFORCES

COVID-19 made a devastating debut on the world scene and launched a new era of how we live and work in our global society. The pandemic ushered in dramatic changes and deepened inequalities: health and economic crises, border closures, lockdowns, mass job losses and the curtailment of educational activities. Nevertheless, it also accelerated innovation and particularly the adoption of new technologies, compressed adoption cycles from years to weeks and transformed entire sectors – government, health care, education, retail, financial services and more.

As we see the prospect of a post-pandemic chapter ahead – thanks in part to the incredible pace of vaccine development and production – we are also challenged to imagine a different way of working, learning and living.

At the Future Skills Centre, we focus intently on ensuring that Canadians have the opportunities and resources to thrive in the future of work. It is critical to ensure that everyone, especially under-represented groups who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, can access opportunities to succeed and share in Canada's prosperity. We are also committed to ensuring employers have access to the talent they need to innovate and grow. As we plan for a future after the pandemic – one in which digital skills and connections have become even more essential – we can't stress enough the urgency of developing skills strategies, policies, and programs that enable us to rebuild better and more inclusively.



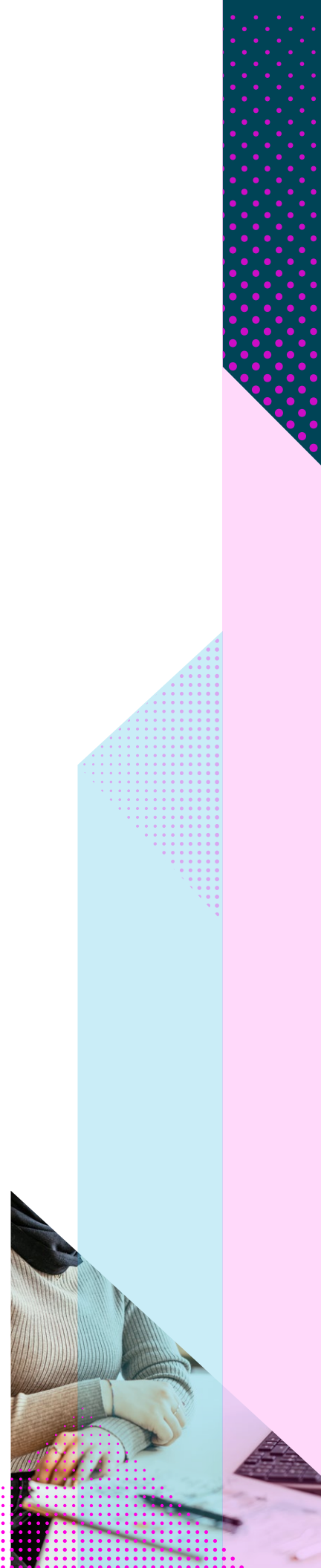
This paper, part of the **Skills for the Post-Pandemic World** series of research reports, explores the issues around skills development for more inclusive workplaces in Canada. It examines the way in which COVID-19 has disproportionately affected diverse groups in the workforce and disrupted some sectors far more than others. The pandemic has also exacerbated discrepancies in access to skills development and exposed systemic barriers. Different groups face varied obstacles in terms of access, including women, Indigenous peoples, racialized people (particularly Black communities), youth, and persons with disabilities. Addressing these inequities will require a comprehensive strategy and a range of policy approaches. Please join us in considering what these findings mean for skills training and opportunities in Canada.

We thank our partners at the Diversity Institute and the Public Policy Forum for convening this research and these discussions. This is a crucial conversation as we turn our collective energy towards rebuilding our economies and educational systems to be better and more inclusive so that we can all share in a more prosperous future. We also thank the Government of Canada for its support of a national future skills strategy that builds on evidence generation and practical delivery of skills training and assessment programs.



PEDRO BARATA

Executive Director, Future Skills Centre





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 has disrupted many industries. Jobs in some sectors have been lost forever, while other sectors have gone through significant changes with new jobs now emerging. What has emerged from the pandemic thus far is a “K-shaped” recovery where some businesses and industries are recovering quickly — or have already fully recovered — while others are still struggling. In some areas, such as for many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) — and particularly for firms in the hospitality, retail and entertainment industries — the impact has been deep and threatens to be lasting. This report explores many of the factors underlying these divergent realities, including sectoral and industry differences, and pays special attention to those factors that have resulted in members of diverse groups being disproportionately impacted. More specifically, this report aims to explore how COVID-19 has exacerbated barriers to skills development, upskilling, reskilling and skills utilization faced by women, Indigenous peoples, racialized people, young people and persons with disabilities.

While the dominant discourse on the skills gap focuses mainly on the shortcomings of workers, the evidence shows that, in many cases, workers with the needed skills are out there, but that systemic discrimination and exclusionary policies and practices make it hard to see them, leaving employers looking for skills in all the wrong places. We need to examine the levers — policies, programs and incentives — available to encourage employers to set targets and develop and implement effective strategies, policies and practices to advance diversity and inclusion in the workplace. We also need to narrow our focus on these areas, especially considering that the economic impacts caused by COVID-19 may be with us for some time. This report highlights the skills needed and barriers that exist to accessing skills training within the context of the pandemic. It closes by exploring what can be done post-COVID-19 to overcome these barriers.

INTRODUCTION

While employers have long complained about the skills gap and the need for more workers to enter the workforce with work-ready skill sets, particularly in the tech sector, many workers experience chronic and systemic underemployment and unemployment. This is especially true for immigrants, internationally educated professionals and other members of equity-seeking groups (e.g., women, racialized people, Indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities), as well as young people.^{1,2,3} Clearly, more concrete and transformational actions are required to address this challenge.

Given this context, it is no surprise that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected members of equity-seeking groups when it comes to skills and employment. When work on this report first began, the national unemployment rate was 10.9 percent, with women and racialized people accounting for a disproportionate share of the unemployed population.⁴ Indeed, while the unemployment rate for persons who identify as non-Indigenous and non-visible minorityⁱ was 9.3 percent, the rate was much higher for those who identify as South Asian (17.8 percent), Arab (17.3 percent), Black (16.8 percent), Southeast Asian (16.5 percent), Latin American (16 percent), Chinese (14 percent), and Filipino (13.2 percent). These groups are also overrepresented in the industries most affected by lockdown measures (e.g., retail and service industries).

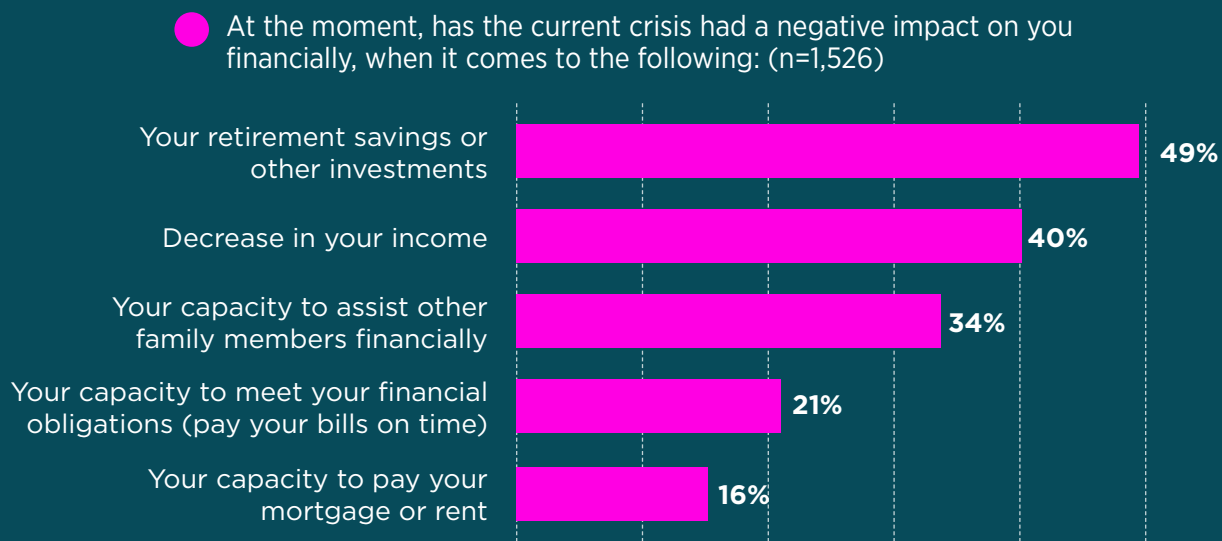
The fact that some groups are doing considerably worse than others, combined with evidence that some groups are managing to navigate the pandemic fairly well, is leading many observers to suggest that Canada is experiencing a “K-shaped” recovery.^{5,6} The concept of a K-shaped recovery refers to a situation where some, whose experiences are depicted by the upper arm of the K, are able to recover quickly and may have even been able to improve their circumstances during the pandemic.⁷ Others, whose experiences are depicted by the bottom arm of the K, are those in industries and jobs whose situations have worsened over the course of the pandemic, such as those working in hospitality, retail and entertainment – where workers tend to come disproportionately from equity-seeking groups – as well as those at small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).⁸ In other words,

there is a split in the economic recovery resulting in divergent paths, where the fortunes of some are bouncing back and flourishing while others’ stagnate, or even fall further behind.⁹

i. The term “visible minority” is used here as it is the official term used by Statistics Canada. When not referencing data from Statistics Canada, we will use the term “racialized”.

Generally, the financial impact of the pandemic on Canadians has been acute. As is highlighted in Figure 1, nearly half of Canadians have experienced a negative impact on their retirement savings and other investments, 40 percent have suffered a decrease in their income, and 21 percent are struggling to meet financial obligations such as paying their bills on time as a result of the pandemic.¹⁰

FIGURE 1: FINANCIAL IMPACT ON CANADIANS



Source: Association for Canadian Studies. (May 2020). COVID-19 tracking survey results.

Concurrent with the pandemic, there has been a worldwide response to racial violence, such as the murder of George Floyd and anti-Asian hate, that has sparked a renewed commitment to addressing inequality in the workplace. For instance, many large employers are signing onto proclamations and making commitments to take concerns about biases in recruitment and workplace culture more seriously. New programs have emerged, such as **The 50 – 30 Challenge**. This challenge, initiated by a partnership between the Government of Canada, civil society and the private sector, calls for gender parity (50:50) and significant representation (at least 30 percent) of underrepresented minority groups (which includes Indigenous peoples, racialized people, persons with disabilities, and people from LGBTQ+ communities) on boards and in positions of senior management. There are over 1,104 participating organizations signed on so far.¹¹ Other examples include **BlackNorth**'s initiative The Pledge to fight anti-Black systemic racism, which has been signed by more than 300 CEOs so far.¹²

Given how COVID-19 has highlighted inequalities and gaps in the skills and employment system, finding innovative solutions to addressing these challenges has become an even greater priority.

Unfortunately, SMEs are not as engaged in these discussions; instead, they are too often in the downward trending split of the K-shaped recovery and focused on surviving. This is worrisome as 69.9 percent of Canadians working in the private sector are employed by small businesses, 19.6 percent by medium-sized businesses and only 10.5 percent work for large businesses.¹³

Finally, it is also critical to note how responses to COVID-19 by firms and by governments have had uneven impacts, deeply affecting access and participation in education and training. This has had, and will continue to have, consequences for well-being, mental health and skills development and utilization well into the future.¹⁴

This report examines the impact of COVID-19 on women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, racialized people, and young people, as well as the implications of these impacts for employment and skills. It will highlight the opportunities for future actions and research to inform and enable inclusive and transformative changes that leave no one behind.



THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON DIVERSE POPULATIONS

The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and disparities, including social and economic barriers, for equity-seeking groups. Overall, what we observe is that many equity-seeking groups – such as women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, racialized people, and young people – are being impacted more severely by the pandemic due to numerous factors, including sectoral differences, as they are often less present in sectors and industries that are more resilient and adaptable in the face of COVID-19.

This latter point is well illustrated by the tech sector, one industry that has actually grown through the pandemic, but one where we are less likely to find members of some equity-seeking groups. Indeed, women make up only 20 percent of tech workers in Canada, and Indigenous peoples, who make up about 5 percent of Canada's population, account for only about 1.33 percent of Canada's tech workforce.¹⁵ It is true that members of racialized communities do make up nearly 31 percent of tech workers in Canada, but it is important to recognize that considerable variation exists between groups.¹⁶ For instance, Chinese and South Asians make up, respectively, 9.8 percent and 9.2 percent of the tech workforce, while making up 4.6 and 5.6 percent of the overall population respectively. Conversely, the share is less than 2.6 percent for Black tech workers, which is slightly lower than their share (3.5 percent) of the overall population.^{17, 18} This nuanced picture underscores the need to track and carefully analyze disaggregated data when examining the pandemic's impact on diverse communities.

Examining wage and employment disparities like this is critical to developing an effective and inclusive skills and employment ecosystem. Those with good foundational skills are more likely

to receive and benefit from future skills training and development opportunities, which makes them more resilient in the face of economic crises. Recent data show that those with lower levels of educational attainment are more vulnerable to automation and also to COVID-19 induced unemployment.^{19, 20} While only 3.6 percent of workers with a bachelor's degree and 1.3 percent with a master's degree face a high risk of automation-related job transformation, these numbers climb to 33.4 percent for workers with no certificate, diploma or degree, and to 24.1 percent for workers with only a high school diploma.²¹ Furthermore, COVID-19 may be exacerbating this situation by motivating employers to “virus proof” their operations by adopting technological solutions to replace human labour.²²

The shift to telework represents another significant pandemic-related development with implications for wage and employment gaps. If telework is here to stay, workers will need training and upskilling in order to successfully adapt.

At the same time, women, immigrants, Indigenous peoples and racialized workers, as well as youth, are all overrepresented in industries that are unable to transition to telework (e.g., front-line workers, essential retail workers) leaving them more vulnerable to the virus.²³ Indeed, many members of equity-seeking groups may not have the capacity to undertake telework due to increased family life demands when working from home, and inequitable access to the resources and infrastructure needed to make remote work possible, such as space to work and access to the required technology such as high-speed internet connections and devices.²⁴

Unfortunately, these negative impacts risk being compounded by the fact that some pandemic relief programs have not reached those who need them most. For example, looking at the Canada Emergency Response Benefits (CERB) statistics, men were slightly more likely to be recipients (51.4 percent) than women (48.5 percent), even though data shows that women have been disproportionately impacted by the economic effects of the pandemic.²⁵ This imbalance is also evident when we look at programs targeting small businesses, as women are more likely to be self-employed and operate enterprises that are smaller, underfinanced and prominent in the very sectors most affected by COVID-19.²⁶

In the sub-sections that follow, we examine how the pandemic has impacted a number of key equity-seeking groups, namely women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, racialized people, and young people. In each case, we examine how the pandemic has affected the economic

and employment situations of individuals in these groups. We also examine how these impacts have intersected with challenges that pre-date the pandemic. Moreover, while these groups are separated here to allow for a more straightforward presentation of our analysis, it is also critical to recognize that, due to intersectionality, many individuals will be affected by trends and phenomena categorized in multiple sub-sections, thus potentially compounding their experiences of the impact of the pandemic.

WOMEN

One of the most striking imbalances to emerge from the onset of the pandemic in Canada was its initially disproportionate impact on women. Research shows that women tend to work in occupations that have higher risks of exposure to COVID-19 and that this is mainly due to the overrepresentation of women in health occupations such as front-line health workers.^{27, 28, 29, 30} Women have also been disproportionately affected by business closures during the pandemic, as many of the affected industries are women-dominated, such as retail, hospitality, food services and accommodation. In fact, there has been a significant decline in business ownership by women (-12.9 percent) as well as a decrease in the number of aggregate hours worked (-43.5 percent) by women.³¹

It is not surprising then that a recent RBC study found woman's labor force participation during the pandemic is the lowest it has been in three decades.³²

These are concerning findings. Research has shown that occupational segregation – where women are less present in well-paid jobs – and their underrepresentation in leadership roles, contribute to wage and employment gaps,³³ something that a generalized pandemic-induced retreat from the labour force by women – even if it is temporary – is likely to exacerbate. The gender wage gap is not new and is present in some form or another in every country.³⁴ In Canada, it persists despite legislation such as the federal Pay Equity Act passed in 2018.³⁵ Research has found women earn less than men from post-secondary graduation onward, and that this gap widens over time.³⁶

In the tech sector, for instance, there is an average wage gap of nearly \$20,000 between women and men who hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and the gap increases with career progression, thus showing the compounded effect of wage gaps on women's lifelong earnings.³⁷

Prior to the pandemic, there had been some progress: examining the gender wage gap from 1998 to 2018, one study found that the gap had decreased by 5.5 percent — to 13.3 percent in 2018 from 18.8 percent in 1998 — and that most of the change was due to the redistribution of men and women across occupations.³⁸ Nonetheless, they also found two-thirds of the gender wage gap was unexplained and may be attributable to other barriers that women face in getting and retaining high paying jobs and progressing at pace throughout their careers such as systemic/institutional discrimination, stereotypes or unconscious biases. While there is still great uncertainty regarding how the pandemic will ultimately impact any of these trends overall, it seems likely that women's progress will be pushed back.

Women also appear to have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic on the home front. For many women, the pre-existing conflicts between work and family responsibilities have been magnified during COVID-19 as working remotely has often meant having to handle a disproportionate share of household chores and caregiving. Indeed, women account for more than 80 percent of unpaid family caregivers.³⁹ These responsibilities have also reduced women's resilience in the face of shocks. Consider, for example, how the closure of schools and daycares due to COVID-19 have caused as many as one in three women to consider quitting their jobs compared to only 19 percent of men.⁴⁰



In terms of actual actions, twelve times as many mothers compared to fathers have exited the labour market due to child care duties.⁴¹ It is not surprising then that November 2020 data from Statistics Canada show that a gap in women's labour force participation persists, suggesting that women are spending time on other activities such as child and family care at a higher rate than they did before the pandemic.^{42, 43} This highlights the need for the federal government⁴⁴ to include a gender-based analysis when examining the effect of the pandemic and when creating relief programs.⁴⁵

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Indigenous peoples in Canada face deep-rooted historic and contemporary discrimination that continues to have disproportionate effects on their livelihoods, including a persistent earnings gap,⁴⁶ which along with the legacy of colonization, is partly explained by lower educational attainment as compared to the general population.⁴⁷ Even before the pandemic,

Indigenous peoples continued to be underrepresented in many sectors, such as in banking and finance,⁴⁸ STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) professions⁴⁹ and ICT (information and communications technology) occupations. All of these are areas that are more conducive to telework than the national average.⁵⁰ As a result, Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately impacted by pandemic induced employment disruptions.⁵¹

Indigenous peoples have also been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 from a health and safety perspective. While it initially seemed that many Indigenous communities had weathered the onset of the pandemic remarkably well,⁵² with the arrival of the second wave, cases of COVID-19 have risen in many Indigenous communities at an alarming rate.⁵³ Increased risks of transmission among Indigenous communities have been cited as a concern due to crowded living conditions, lack of health services and limited access to clean water, which were already factors making it harder for Indigenous people to access paid work, thus affecting employment outcomes.⁵⁴ For those individuals living in urban areas, Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in populations considered at high risk for COVID-19 exposure, such as people living in poverty and people experiencing homelessness.⁵⁵

In addition to being more vulnerable, on average, to the virus itself – due to forms of marginalization such as poor access to health care and overcrowded housing conditions – Indigenous workers also find themselves in a more vulnerable position economically. Between February and May 2020, Indigenous workers lost 51,000 jobs, resulting in a job loss rate of 14 percent nationwide.⁵⁶

Since the start of the pandemic, employment declines have been especially high in occupational areas such as trades, transport and equipment, and in sales and service occupations.⁵⁷ These are also occupations where Indigenous peoples are overrepresented.⁵⁸

Economic recovery has also been slower for Indigenous peoples than for the general Canadian population, particularly for Indigenous women.⁵⁹ Part of this difference is likely due to their less advantaged starting point: Environics Analytics developed an index to measure financial vulnerability and found that First Nations populations were highly vulnerable due to low savings and low discretionary income, which translates into lower levels of resilience when faced with a period of unemployment.⁶⁰ Indeed, a poll conducted during the early stages of the pandemic

found that almost 30 percent of Indigenous people expected to borrow money to purchase essential goods compared to 20 percent of non-Indigenous people.⁶¹ Additionally, Indigenous entrepreneurs have had more difficulty accessing credit during the pandemic.^{62, 63} For instance, at first, only businesses with taxable income were eligible for support from the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA), which excluded businesses on reserves as these are not taxed.⁶⁴ While this requirement has since been amended, the delay was costly for many of these Indigenous-owned businesses.

30%
of Indigenous
people

VS

20%
of non-Indigenous
people

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Persons with disabilities (a sizeable community given that one in five Canadians aged 15 or older reports having one or more disabilities⁶⁵) also faced significant barriers to employment before the arrival of the pandemic. These barriers help to explain why the employment rate of working age Canadians with a disability is much lower than that of the general population (49 percent) prior to the pandemic.⁶⁶ One unfortunate result of this lower rate of employment is that persons with disabilities are living in poverty at rates 40 to 200 percent higher than other Canadians, and are more likely to be employed in low-skilled jobs that are at a high risk of automation.^{67, 68}

Unfortunately, there is currently a lack of data on the impacts of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities.⁶⁹ But what is clear from the existing data, is that almost half of persons with disabilities in Canada have indicated that their health has worsened during the pandemic and that this worsening can be primarily attributed to the number of health services that were suspended or became inaccessible due to the virus.⁷⁰ Persons with disabilities are also more likely to report that their mental health has worsened since the beginning of the pandemic when compared to the general population.^{71, 72} Poor physical and mental health can result in lowered employment outcomes and difficulties maintaining employment.

The limited data that does exist also paints a concerning picture when it comes to employment for persons with disabilities as more than one-third of persons with a disability who are employed have experienced a permanent or temporary job loss or reduced working hours since the start of the pandemic.⁷³

Furthermore, a recent Statistics Canada survey found 31 percent of respondents with a disability have reported a decrease in household income and 45 percent have had to rely solely on income from non-employment sources during the pandemic.⁷⁴

Persons with disabilities are also significantly impacted by the “digital divide” – that is, having less access to the internet and computing devices, and the opportunities that flow from that access – than more privileged segments of society. At the most basic level, one in five persons with a disability in Canada does not use the internet.⁷⁵ With the increased digitization of society during the pandemic, this means that persons with disabilities may experience greater challenges engaging in telework, if they telework at all. It also raises concerns regarding their ability to access health information and stay connected to friends and family, which can be beneficial for mental health.

RACIALIZED PEOPLE

Racialized people have similarly been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. For example, COVID-19 mortality rates are higher in neighbourhoods with a greater number of racialized people.⁷⁶ Data from the City of Toronto show that racialized people account for most reported COVID-19 cases (76 percent) despite accounting for 52 percent of the city’s population.⁷⁷ Individuals identifying as South Asian or Indo-Caribbean; Southeast Asian; Latin American; Black; or Arab, Middle Eastern, or West Asian have all experienced disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 infection. Conversely, individuals identifying as White or East Asian have experienced disproportionately low case rates. For example, Black Torontonians comprise nine percent of the population but, in August 2020, accounted for 13 percent of COVID-19 cases in the city.⁷⁸ Racialized people also make up a disproportionate percentage (69 percent) of individuals hospitalized due to COVID-19 in Toronto.⁷⁹

In Montreal, strong correlations have been found between individuals identifying as Black and individuals experiencing COVID-19 infections.⁸⁰ These results can be attributed to the high number of Black people, as well as some other racialized populations, employed in health-care and other front-line occupations where they face higher risk of exposure to COVID-19.⁸¹ For instance, Black and Filipino women are overrepresented among jobs such as nurse’s aides, orderlies and patient service associates.⁸² The intersection between lower socio-economic status and racialization also plays a role as racialized populations and populations with lower socio-economic status often have fewer options for living arrangements, transportation and access to services, placing them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

COVID-19 has also had a disproportionate financial impact on racialized groups, who already faced higher levels of poverty and unemployment prior to the pandemic.⁸³ Between February and May

16%
of racialized
workforce

compared to

12%
nationwide
workforce
lost work

2020, approximately 300,000 jobs or 16 percent of the racialized workforce lost work, in contrast with a job loss rate of 12 percent nationwide.⁸⁴ Additionally, around one-third of all Canadians who were employed pre-pandemic reported losing their jobs or had their working hours reduced, with particularly high rates among Filipino (42.2 percent) and West Asian (46.5 percent) individuals.⁸⁵ A national survey examining “economic vulnerability” scores during COVID-19 found Latin American, South Asian and Black individuals had higher scores compared to non-racialized individuals.

➤ **(“Economic vulnerability” scores include inputs like need for financial support from family members, ability to make mortgage or rent payments, pay bills on time, decreases in income, and a perception by an individual that a crisis constitutes a major threat to their personal financial situation.)⁸⁶**

Again these high levels of vulnerability during a crisis are not surprising given the wage gaps between racialized and non-racialized persons that existed prior to the pandemic and which have long been documented and extensively studied.⁸⁷ While racialized individuals as a whole face economic exclusion compared to their non-racialized counterparts, it is important to recognize that the “racialized” category is not monolithic: the extent of economic exclusion is worse for some groups, such as people who identify as Black, South Asian and Arab.⁸⁸ Discrimination is one of the causes of this problem: research in Canada has found employer discrimination towards “ethnic” names such as those of Indian, Pakistani, Greek or Chinese origin,⁸⁹ as well as those of North African or Black origin or affinity.⁹⁰ Moreover, data from the **Black Experience Project** revealed that 40 percent of Black youth felt they were “only sometimes” or “never” accepted by their high school teachers. This can have severe consequences on learning and skills acquisition and can contribute to employment and wage gaps.⁹¹

The unequal effects of the pandemic can also be seen among business owners. Businesses that are majority-owned by racialized people were more likely (24.7 percent) to report a decrease in revenue of 40 percent or more, compared to all business in Canada (21.1 percent).⁹² Moreover, these businesses were also less likely to be able to take on more debt or to have adequate liquid assets to continue operations.⁹³ For example, when data from the **Black Business and Professional Association** is compared to a survey by the **Canadian Federation of Independent Business**, it shows that Black-owned businesses were far more negatively impacted and far less likely to benefit from COVID-19 relief programs.⁹⁴

Racialized people also face a digital divide largely due to a lack of internet and computing device affordability. This divide has been especially problematic during the pandemic as work, school and essential services have all moved online, and access to technology and the possession of digital skills have become basic requirements for everyday life.⁹⁵ Racialized people are also more likely to live in low-income areas characterized by crowding and households that are multigenerational,⁹⁶ which are less ideal conditions from which to engage in telework even if the technological infrastructure is in place. Crowded living conditions can also mean individuals do not have privacy in which to access mental health or social supports, or for studying remotely.⁹⁷

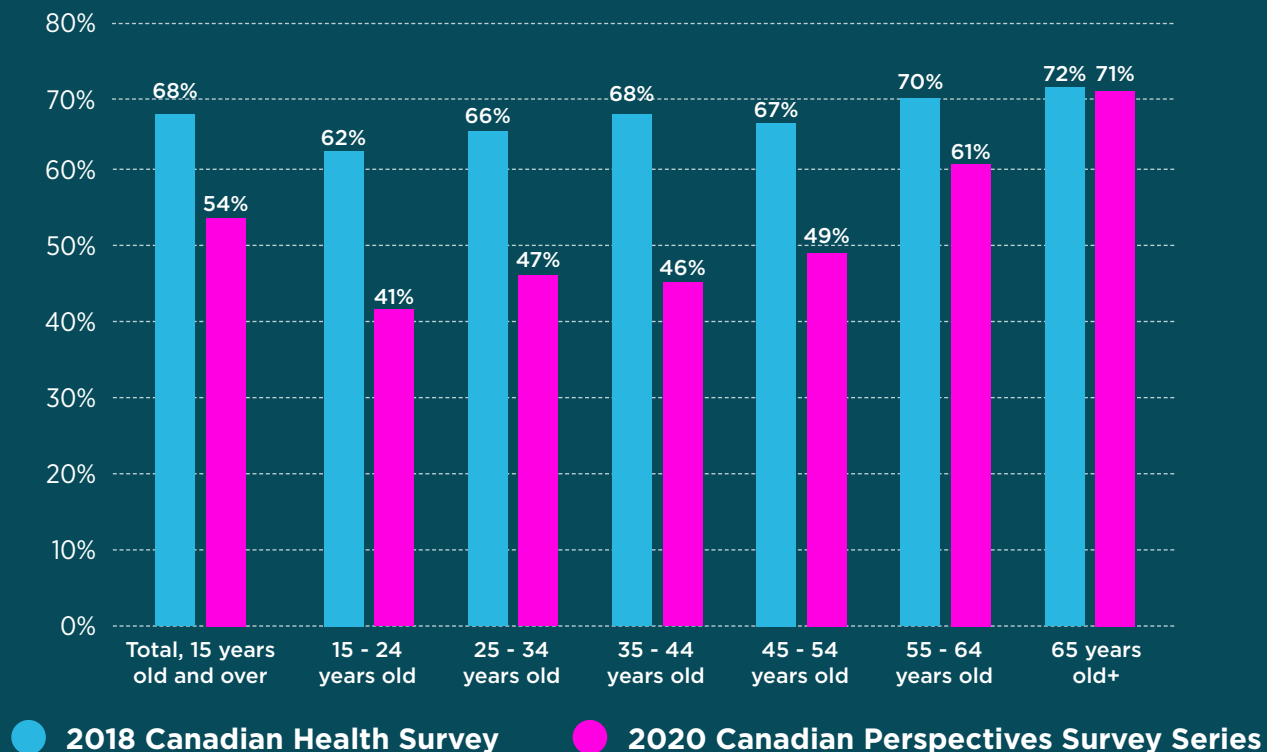
YOUNG PEOPLE

COVID-19 has created increased stressors, such as financial concerns, uncertainty, disrupted routines and social isolation that can result in poorer outcomes for mental health among young people.

In fact, the rate of young people, aged 15 to 29, not in employment, education or training (NEET) increased dramatically as a result of the pandemic, rising from 12 percent in January to 18 percent in March and 24 percent in April.⁹⁸

By April, this rate was even higher among the 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 age ranges (27 percent and 28 percent respectively), ranges where a lower percentage of the population is normally in education. This has severe consequences, including having 21 percent of young Canadians aged 15 to 30 report being very or extremely concerned about their own mental health.⁹⁹ As shown in Figure 2, there has been a sharp decrease in the quality of self-reported mental health among Canadians compared to before the pandemic, with particularly large differences in younger age groups.¹⁰⁰

FIGURE 2: SELF-PERCEIVED MENTAL HEALTH BY AGE GROUPS

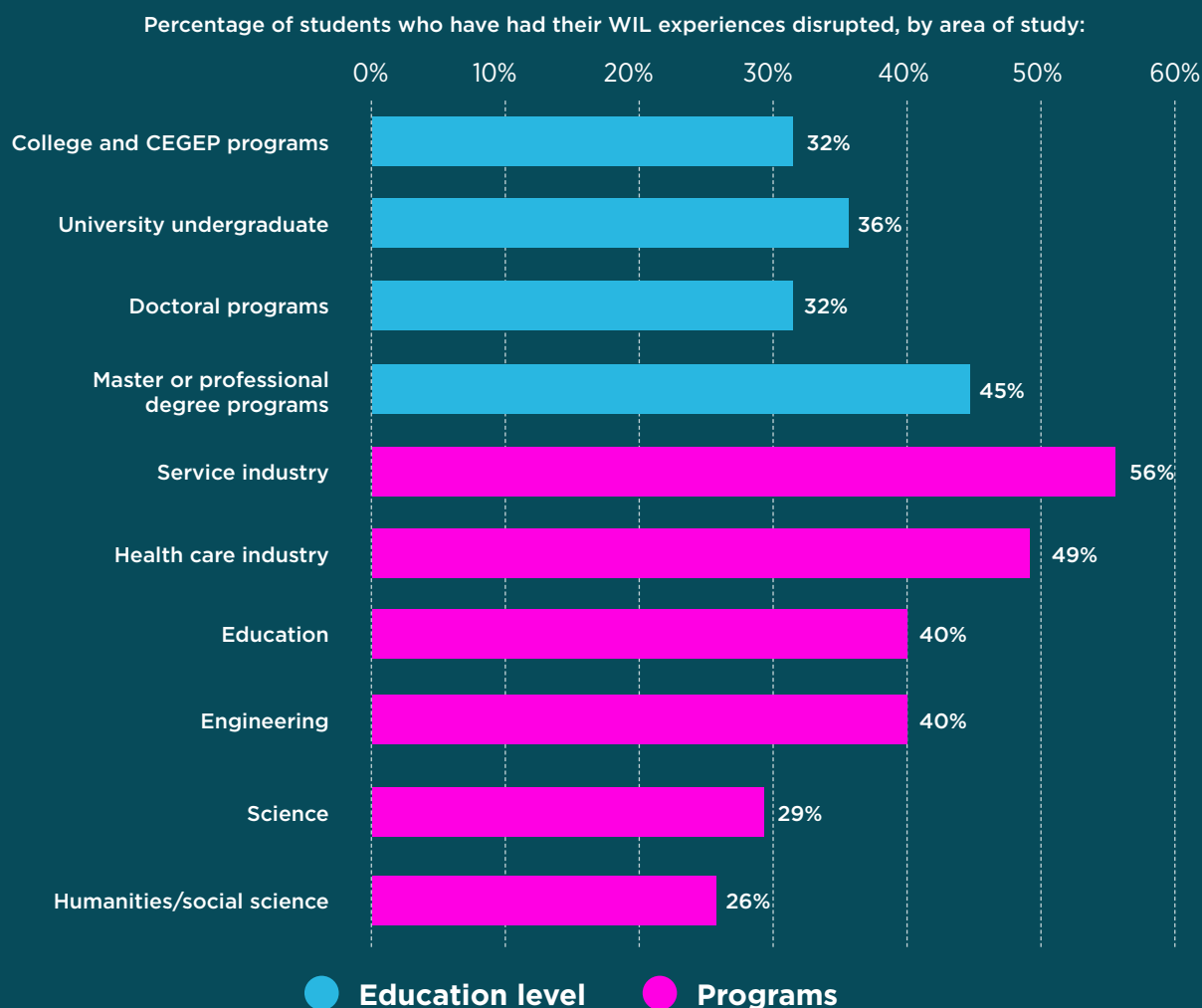


Source: Statistics Canada (2020). Canadians report lower self-perceived mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students have also been impacted by the disruption of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) programs due to the pandemic, especially the many who relied on work placements such as internships, co-ops or residencies for part-time income or as part of their program requirements. Statistics Canada data from April 2020 reveals that 35 percent of post-secondary students surveyed had their work placements delayed or cancelled because of the pandemic.¹⁰¹

Cancellation and delays of WIL programs, and associated unemployment, can significantly delay crucial skills development for young workers and result in important negative long term impacts on their careers. In fact, 52 percent of respondents who lost their WIL opportunities due to the pandemic stated they were very or extremely concerned about their credentials being seen as less valuable as a result.¹⁰² This disruption has also translated into financial stress, which exacerbates the taxing psychological cost of the pandemic on young people.

DISRUPTION OF WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL) PROGRAMS



Source: Statistics Canada (2020). COVID-19 pandemic: [Impacts on the work placements of postsecondary students in Canada](#).

Finally, online education is creating the potential for new gaps to emerge as there is a risk some students will be left behind. Prior to the pandemic, youth from equity-seeking communities were already suffering from a lack of skills, especially digital skills. Without equitable access to quality infrastructure and support such as high-speed internet, computing devices and appropriate dedicated space, this gap is being exacerbated by the pandemic.¹⁰³

And while young people across all income levels believe digital skills will be important to their education and careers, youth from lower-income households are less likely than those from higher-income households to report having access to digital technologies and opportunities to develop digital skills.^{104, 105} Reversing these negative trends will require ensuring equitable access to infrastructure and device for all.¹⁰⁶



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

SECTOR SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has had uneven impacts on employers as data show sharp sectoral variations. Nationally, 37 percent of businesses laid off staff during the pandemic and, of these, 64 percent laid off at least half their staff.¹⁰⁷ According to the most recent data, the sectors where the highest proportions of businesses had to lay off half or more of their workforce included arts, entertainment and recreation (84 percent); health care and social assistance (81 percent); and accommodation and food services (74 percent).¹⁰⁸ As of spring 2021, many sectors are still seeing lower employment rates compared to a year earlier, further highlighting the need for a response that will account for sectoral differences.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, one particularly impacted sector — accommodation and food services — saw a 26 percent decline in employment between February 2020 and February 2021,¹¹⁰ with 29.6 percent of businesses in this sector expecting a reduction in their number of employees over the next three months (spring 2021).¹¹¹ Concurrently, other sectors, especially the tech sector, had recovered to their pre-pandemic employment levels as early as May 2020.¹¹² According to a survey from Statistics Canada released in March 2021, more than half (51.3 percent) of businesses “did not know how long they could continue to operate at their current level of revenue and expenditures before considering closure or bankruptcy.”¹¹³

For most businesses, survival has been contingent on their ability to adapt and pivot, to new products, new services and e-commerce. One study found that 97 percent of those surveyed felt COVID-19 sped up their company’s digital transformation and digital communications strategies by an average of six years.¹¹⁴ Some have made the transition more easily than others — such as retail, banking and finance, telecommunications, and technology and information technology — while others have struggled.¹¹⁵

Adopting a gender lens to analyze the sectoral differences is crucial as we know that women-owned businesses tend to be smaller — nearly 93 percent of majority female-owned businesses are micro-firms, meaning they have fewer than 20 employees.¹¹⁶ Women-owned businesses are also overrepresented in sectors, such as health care and social assistance, which have been highly impacted by COVID-19. On average, these women-owned businesses are taking twice as long as businesses owned by men to recover from COVID-19.^{117, 118, 119} Even in sectors that rebounded quickly such as construction, women-owned businesses have not bounced back as quickly as business owned by men.¹²⁰

Retraining will be crucial as some sectors will be permanently altered by the impacts of the pandemic. Particular sectors that have been hard hit are not likely to rebound in their previous form, such as hospitality. As mentioned previously, some of the sectors most impacted by COVID-19 (e.g., hospitality, arts and culture, services) often have a disproportionate representation of women, Indigenous peoples and racialized people amongst their workers.

While retraining and upskilling will be crucial, systemic barriers may prevent skills from being gained or effectively utilized, and program and policy experts aiming to move the needle need to take these factors into account.^{121, 122}

Accordingly, the federal government will spend \$1.5 billion in job-training support to help unemployed workers in hard-hit sectors such as transportation and hospitality to re-enter the workforce.¹²³

A disproportionate number of displaced workers are new immigrants, racialized Canadians, women and/or Indigenous peoples, and they will need new skills to transition to new jobs. At the same time, there has been a massive increase in the demand for some roles — for instance, personal support workers — who are so essential that they have been among the very first in Canada to receive COVID-19 vaccinations.¹²⁴ Nationally, there has been a deficit in care workers for years¹²⁵ clearly highlighting the need for sector-specific strategies to reskill more workers in this essential area.

Similarly, manufacturing, which already had trouble meeting its demand for labour pre-COVID-19,¹²⁶ is still experiencing a robust demand for workers, at least partially thanks to the **Made in Canada Project** which was created by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada as part of its response to the pandemic. This project has pushed companies to retool and expand their production capacity, while also training and reskilling their workforces.¹²⁷ But the sector needs skilled workers:

skills shortages were the most significant plant management issue in 2020, and it will have to be addressed along with supply chain capacity.¹²⁸

INCREASING DEMAND FOR DIGITAL SKILLS

Three related factors are increasing the demand for digital skills. First, many organizations across sectors are pivoting to more digital work environments. Second, this increase in the adoption of technology has fueled growth in the ICT sector, where many companies have expanded dramatically during the pandemic. Finally, the shift to homeschooling and online education and training, e-commerce, online delivery of services, logistics and supply chain management, cyber security and so on has increased the general demand for digital skills.¹²⁹

Research has shown that certain digital skills are lacking amongst many equity-seeking groups. For example, despite 30 years of advocacy, there are fewer women in computer science, and only marginally more in engineering today, than three decades ago.¹³⁰

And while racialized people do tend to be overrepresented in the ICT sector overall, certain groups such as Black people and Indigenous peoples are not.¹³¹

While the pandemic has further increased the tremendous demand for digital skills, it is important to note that the ways in which digital skills are defined are critically important for matching supply with demand.

For example, the recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Skills 2019 report found that digital skills were the top competence required by Ontario employers. As illustrated in Table 1, however, unpacking the data further showed that, when discussing digital skills, the majority of job postings that listed digital skills requirements (75 percent) were referring to the use of Microsoft Office and spreadsheets rather than “deep” technology skills such as software development or Java programming (10 percent).¹³² Developing clear definitions of what employers mean by skills (versus tools or applications) is also critical to ensuring that we are assessing, developing and utilizing skills effectively. Working on establishing common definitions is an ongoing focus for research on skills in Canada as existing definitions and frameworks vary considerably.¹³³

TABLE 1: DIGITAL SKILLS PRESENT IN JOB POSTINGS, ONTARIO

Skill	Job Postings	Percentage of postings listing this skill
Java	68,847	10%
Software Development	76,120	
Technical Support	64,084	15%
SAP (enterprise management software)	62,525	
SQL (programming language for databases)	100,167	
Spreadsheets	74,446	75%
Microsoft Word	145,048	
Microsoft PowerPoint	149,155	
Microsoft Office	306,588	
Microsoft Excel	382,851	

Source: Calculations by Cukier, W., based on Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2020). [Preparing for the Future of Work in Canada, OECD Reviews on Local Job Creation](#); see also Vu, V., Lamb, C., and Willoughby, R. (2019). [I, Human: The digital and soft skills driving Canada's labour market](#). Brookfield Institute.

For instance, digital skills are often thought of as synonymous with computer science and engineering. There is little doubt that demand for workers trained in these disciplines is strong and that we need to focus on continuing to promote the growth of these fields and make them more diverse, inclusive, and representative of the general population. At the same time, and as shown in Table 1, there is also robust demand for workers who can use basic digital applications. There is also a high demand for hybrid workers who understand organizations and how technology can be applied, even in firms one would normally think of as intensely focused on deep technological skills such as artificial intelligence and Internet-of-Things (IoT) companies. Recognizing that the demand for digital skills is much broader and more basic than is often thought is critical, because this broader category of skills is far more accessible, especially for members of currently underrepresented groups, than the narrower and deeper ones, and thus represents an opportunity for effecting real positive change relatively quickly.

We have seen that some industries are growing and that digitization is creating new demands for new skills.¹³⁴ In particular, employers are now focusing on the development of skills required to work in an increasingly digitized environment.¹³⁵ Technical skills aside, employers also need individuals who can learn new skills quickly and who are increasingly adaptable to innovation and rapid changes.¹³⁶ Entire industries are repositioning themselves and employees, with the help of their employers, will need to pivot and learn new skills to keep up with a rapidly changing labour market. In this context of rapid change, improved definitions of skills are just the start: we need to build on these definitions and develop new ways of assessing and developing skills and ensure that the new opportunities that are emerging are accessible to workers of all backgrounds. Moreover, better and more granular definitions of skills also offer the benefit of boosting alternative pathways to well-paid “digital jobs” because of how they enable the provisioning of more tailored training and skills development programs for specific in-demand tools and skills.

Such an approach can be especially valuable for creating opportunities for underrepresented groups to access the skills they need.

For example:

- **NPower Canada** is a charity that provides free training for marginalized youth in digital and professional skills and connects them with career opportunities;
- **Firespirit** has a similar mission to help unlock “First Nations and Northern human resources potential,” through employment services and capacity building;
- **Actua**, Canada’s largest STEM outreach organization, has done a lot of work during the pandemic to provide virtual STEM and digital skills resources;
- The **HyperTalent** program partners with tech companies in British Columbia to provide internships for Indigenous post-secondary students and graduates; and
- The **Advanced Digital and Professional Training Program (ADaPT)** aims to address employment gaps for recent graduates across disciplines (and particularly those from equity-seeking groups) by providing them with the tools to develop digital and professional skills through intensive training, which then transitions into work-integrated learning opportunities.
- **Plato Testing** is an organization that is leveraging a network of Indigenous software testers to provide solutions to clients who would have previously outsourced this work. Plato Testing is addressing the technology talent shortage by investing in training and meaningful employment for Indigenous peoples.

RENEWED COMMITMENT TO ESSENTIAL SKILLS

While digital skills are crucial to changing work environments, there has also been an increase in demand for other skills. Studies have shown that technical skills contribute to only a small percentage of an individual's job success, while “soft skills” account for the vast majority of this success.¹³⁷ Critically, these soft skills are not nearly as susceptible to automation, making them even more valuable to workers. Moreover, the advent of the pandemic-induced shift to remote work and other associated workplace disruptions means that soft skills have become more important than ever. For example, social and emotional skills have become crucial in industries where individuals now have to develop relationships with clients remotely in contrast to pre-pandemic times when such tasks could be accomplished in person.¹³⁸ Responding effectively to these sorts of disruptions also require employees to possess creativity, innovation and problem-solving skills. The importance of soft skills such as these — as well as others like critical thinking, continuous learning and the ability to work with others — is also highlighted by the fact that the most popular online courses on LinkedIn for 2020 were time management and strategic thinking.^{139, 140}

As mentioned, there are a variety of ongoing research projects that are already grappling with the challenge of developing a shared lexicon and set of shared definitions and frameworks for discussing skills.^{141, 142} Ensuring we have objective ways of defining, measuring, developing and utilizing these skills is therefore critical. Previously, we have been accustomed to using credentials such as diplomas and years of experience as rough-and-ready proxies for skills, but increasingly these credentials are being recognized as insufficiently precise for today's rapidly changing labour market where employers are raising concerns over skills gaps, and workers, especially internationally trained workers, cannot get the skills they possess recognized. Focusing on skills instead of credentials, enables greater agility and a more fluid market by shifting the discourse from “Where did you go to school?” to “What can you do?” New modes of delivery and innovative approaches, particularly for basic language and literacy (key gateways to other skills), are critical. Evaluation of models that work, for example, for teaching English and French as a second working language, are key as research suggests the impact of existing approaches is, at best, uneven. With the shift to more digital delivery, there are new possibilities, including an improved ability to reach more people and to accelerate efforts to foster skills acquisition and development.



SKILLS FOR MANAGING AND LEADING IN NEW ENVIRONMENTS

One of the biggest changes caused by the onset of the pandemic was the massive shift to telework. Research conducted by Statistics Canada and released in May 2020 concluded that while working from home was initially a temporary response to the pandemic for many, it may become a new normal for many organizations.¹⁴³

This shift is creating a need to develop new management and co-ordination skills, including ways to manage the challenges of health and safety, stress and wellness¹⁴⁴ (to say nothing of the need for managers to learn how to manage their teams and workgroups virtually). Leaders also face the challenge of mastering new skills, including empathy and a greater focus on inclusion.¹⁴⁵ There is also a pressing need for them to develop enhanced trauma-informed approaches to management and skills training as a response to the harrowing experiences that many workers have faced due to the health, social and economic fallout of the pandemic. For example, many employers may now have several employees who are simultaneously facing financial challenges in their household, the social trauma of racial injustice, as well as experiencing high levels of stress as family members battle COVID-19. In some tragic cases, managers may even need to support and accommodate workers experiencing the grief of losing loved ones. Skills such as resilience, emotional stability, flexibility and adaptability are being recognized as increasingly crucial.

Leaders also need to cultivate the skills needed to lead employees through the reskilling and upskilling needed to remain competitive in today's rapidly changing environment.¹⁴⁶ For organizations working in the reskilling and upskilling ecosystem, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on empathetic and trauma-informed approaches,^{147, 148} as many participants in their programs may be experiencing traumas that have been caused or exacerbated by the pandemic.

Small businesses have been the hardest hit by the pandemic and those owned by women, Indigenous peoples and Black people have been hit hardest of all. Providing skills and capacity building support to these business is needed to help them adapt and survive. Given how essential these SMEs are to the Canadian economy and to the communities they serve, employers and governments should be well-motivated to adopt a gender and equity lens when developing recovery programs.

Specifically, research shows that additional support for overall business planning and strategy, financial literacy, digital literacy and more, are critical. Ensuring that these supports are accessible to smaller businesses and the self-employed is especially important from an equity perspective as it is amongst these businesses that we find the most women-owned businesses.^{149, 150, 151}

SKILLS TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Previously, much of the focus on skills building has been on fixing the job seeker. This is a problematic approach as research clearly shows that many organizations are not effectively accessing the skills pools that already exist. This frustrating situation is made more concerning by the fact that, because of systemic barriers and/or biases, already marginalized groups are further disproportionately penalized when they could, by using their skills to fill these skills gaps, be part of the solution. A good example of what such an approach can look like comes from computer manufacturer Dell. Recognizing the value of neurodiversity, especially in a tight labour market, Dell launched a program to recruit people with autism, seeing it as a way to get more creative and find the talent it needs.¹⁵² In addition to targeting people with autism for recruitment, this program also includes flexible hours and work-from-home options to tap into the talent of stay-at-home parents, students and retirees. The idea of tapping into existing talent is nowhere clearer than in the underutilization of internationally trained professionals with health-related skills in the fight against COVID-19.¹⁵³

While studies about diversity and inclusion practices in large organizations are plentiful, the issue has not been studied as much in the context of SMEs, even though they employ nearly 90 percent of Canadians working in the private sector.¹⁵⁴ Additional study is necessary because SMEs themselves have less human resources capacity to consciously work towards improving diversity and equity incomes in recruitment and staffing. And considering the skills gaps faced by SMEs, additional study of how recruitment strategies aimed at capturing diverse talent could be improved could be particularly valuable.¹⁵⁵ SMEs often lack human resources infrastructure, hampering efforts to develop diversity and inclusion practices or expand recruitment pools — a key process for reaching more diverse candidates. Human resources support and resources would enable an increased focus on racial inclusion, including investments in diversity training. We need a comprehensive and concerted effort involving all stakeholders to foster an inclusive and diverse workforce. Furthermore, we must equip everyone from employers, to workers to boards of directors with information on how to ensure that such a workforce operates cohesively and at the highest levels of efficiency.

Critically, there is no trade-off between diversity and qualification. What is being advocated here is not a lowering of standards, but rather, an intentional effort by firms to critically examine whether their hiring practices actually match their skills needs, to start recruiting in previously unexplored places and to create a more diverse pipeline of candidates by decreasing their implicit, and inefficiency-generating, biases.

Only by recognizing and addressing the systemic biases that exist throughout the recruitment process and by working hard to overcome the implicit biases behind phenomena of “like hiring like” — which often occur without any real thought — can these challenges be overcome.

Indeed, one example of how research can help to combat the problems SMEs face in recruiting a diverse workforce is a study that found that candidates with “Asian sounding names” were 20 percent less likely to be called for interviews in large organizations, and 40 percent less likely in smaller organizations than similar candidates without Asian sounding names.¹⁵⁶ Knowledge of this form of discrimination and understanding that it is occurring are the first steps towards combating it.

Businesses also need new skills to address diversity and inclusion as well as access to support, such as the Diversity Assessment Tool (DAT).¹⁵⁷ The DAT is a tool designed to provide a comprehensive organizational analysis that examines an organization’s leadership and strategy, performance metrics, and many other dimensions for how they promote diversity.¹⁵⁸ Access to this type of support will better enable them to develop and implement strategies through which they can better meet their skills needs while simultaneously providing greater and better employment opportunities for diverse communities.

INNOVATIVE AND ACCESSIBLE APPROACHES FOR UPSKILLING AND RESKILLING

During the pandemic (especially in March and early April 2020) searches for terms such as online learning, e-learning and Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) increased exponentially.¹⁵⁹ The rapid shift to online learning worked for some but not for others and will likely exacerbate and compound learning barriers for equity-seeking groups.¹⁶⁰ Apprenticeships and many work-integrated learning programs have also been adversely affected during the pandemic by the closure of colleges and universities, as most of these institutions’ offerings have been disrupted.¹⁶¹

With high levels of unemployment and many workers losing hours, particularly members of equity-seeking groups, many have put learning on hold to focus on supporting their families.¹⁶² Moreover, as employers are weathering the economic effects of the pandemic, many may not be willing or able to support training and upskilling. This is especially true for SMEs who may have difficulty funding training for employees during COVID-19, compared to larger companies who have greater resources.¹⁶³

As has already been pointed out a few times, a digital divide exists for members of equity-seeking groups. Without affordable or dependable access to the internet and/or appropriate digital skills, many are unable to access online learning programs.¹⁶⁴ Consequently, many of these programs actually primarily benefit those who already have high levels of skills. Indeed, research has shown that, prior to the pandemic, those who took online courses already possessed strong digital problem-solving skills.¹⁶⁵ If we want a more diverse population of learners with more varied levels of existing skills to be able to reskill, this will require curricula and teaching methods specifically designed for the needs of this population.

TAILORING SUPPORTS FOR WOMEN AND DIVERSE POPULATIONS

Programs tailored to specific groups will be important for an equitable recovery, but so too will be a recognition that individuals often experience overlapping forms of oppression and marginalization. For example, **YWCA Canada** maintains that gender inequality cannot be separated from other types of inequality as gender intersects with race, Indigeneity, religion, class, immigration status, ability and sexuality. Thus, YWCA Canada calls for an intersectional approach¹⁶⁶ to pandemic recovery efforts that includes universal access to reliable, quality, affordable childcare.¹⁶⁷ Wraparound supports to ensure access to training, childcare — while also reinforcing childcare — transportation, trauma-informed approaches, career coaching and counselling are all essential aspects that will need to be considered to ensure an equal recovery.^{168, 169} This is especially true for some racialized groups who, in addition to COVID-19-related trauma, have faced trauma related to systemic discrimination and racism when accessing services and resources.¹⁷⁰ This further highlights the fact that a one-size-fits-all approach to recovery will not work.

New modes of delivering work-integrated learning, which combine skills training with real work experience and income, have been shown to be more effective than traditional classroom training alone and may be more accessible to equity-seeking groups. Recent studies also suggest that providing experiential learning opportunities (e.g., hackathons, entrepreneurial training) can provide opportunities to develop skills and apply them. For instance, the **Workforce Innovation**

and Inclusion Project aims to identify methods to alleviate economic and social challenges for newcomers — to find areas for program improvements for underserved newcomer groups, to broaden the talent pool by taking advantage of, and scaling, effective skills-development programs, and to increase employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.¹⁷¹ This will help to not only bridge the skills gaps, but to create and foster equity by also bridging the opportunity gap for women and diverse Canadians.

Ensuring employers are engaged in programs aimed at developing skills for employment is critical. For instance, in **Germany**, vocational training combines academic training and paid work placement, and involves employers and trade unions working together to standardize the skills covered and ensure the quality of training. Other examples, such as Singapore, focus on core competencies and ensure that workers have quality and relevant skills that are transferable.¹⁷² Culturally appropriate approaches that use relevant examples and take into consideration unique lived experiences are also vital.¹⁷³ For instance, embedding English language training into the workplace is also important for helping diverse workers improve their language skills in context, but also for their overall skills development and social integration beyond their current employment.¹⁷⁴

ACCESS TO INFRASTRUCTURE TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

With the growing focus on digitization, digital skills and online delivery of everything, the digital divide between the privileged and the underprivileged has been exacerbated. This digital divide stems from multiple factors often forgotten or underestimated, including the cost of broadband internet service and a lack of access to computing devices, especially for low-income and racialized households.^{175, 176, 177} Young people from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have access to internet-enabled devices at home and a lack of computing devices in the home is linked to lower levels of digital literacy.¹⁷⁸

Learning online also requires infrastructure. For example, in a recent survey students were asked to list one factor that served as a barrier to learning at home and 30 percent listed a lack of access to reliable internet and/or internet-enabled devices and not knowing how to use technology as obstacles hampering their ability to participate in online learning.¹⁷⁹

In Toronto, programs such as the **Toronto Public Library's WI-FI Hotspot Lending Program** have been providing free internet access to low-income households in an attempt to close the digital

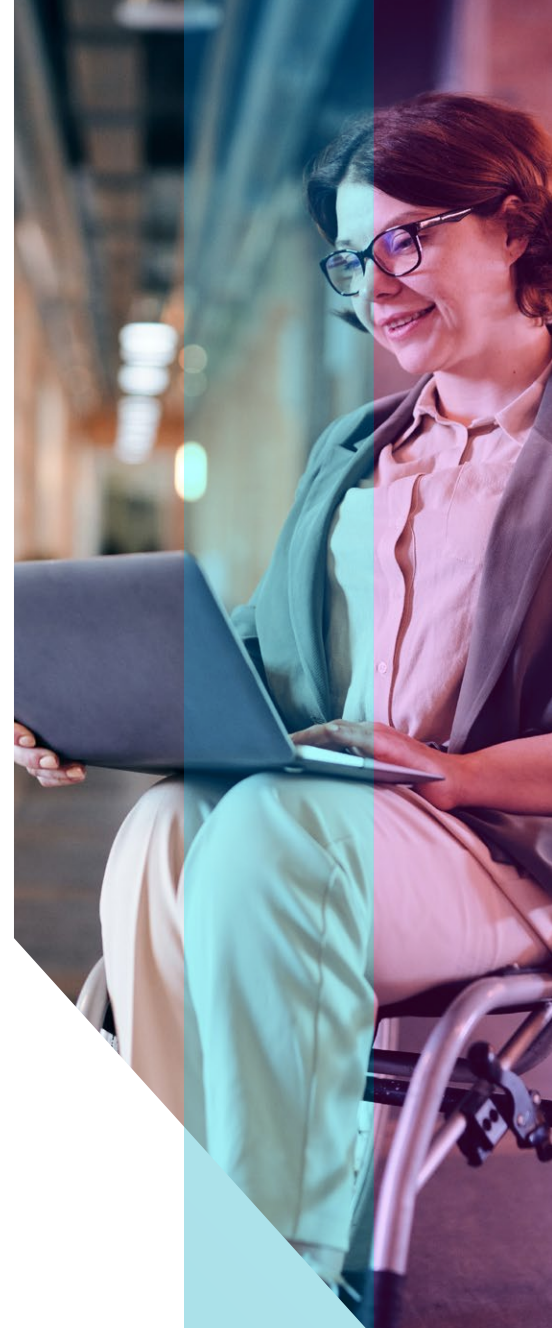
divide. School boards such as the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board have been providing internet-enabled devices and internet access to students who do not have them. In Québec, during the first few months of the pandemic, Videotron, a primary internet provider, lifted data caps and overage fees to help remote workers, students and essentially everyone manage the impacts of the initial lockdown.¹⁸⁰ But this approach only serves to further underscore the question of whether the internet should be considered a public utility or a basic necessity in the first place.¹⁸¹

It is also important to recognize that there is a large urban-rural divide in high-speed internet availability.¹⁸² When compared to urban centres, rural and remote communities have fewer Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to choose from, lower internet service speeds and pay higher prices.¹⁸³ Since many Indigenous communities are rural or in remote locations, the digital divide disproportionately affects Indigenous households (though it must also be noted that many urban Indigenous people cannot afford to have internet in their homes). In Indigenous communities across Canada, approximately 24 percent of households have internet access speeds of 50/10 Mbps (megabits per second), compared to 84 percent of households in Canada.¹⁸⁴ (The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, or CRTC, the federal agency that regulates ISPs, has designated 50/10 Mbps as the basic level of internet services that all Canadians should be able to access in order to participate fully in the Canadian economy and society.)¹⁸⁵ Over 75 percent of First Nations communities in British Columbia do not have access to broadband internet service.¹⁸⁶ Given this lack of access, it should come as no surprise that the shift to online learning during COVID-19 has been problematic for many Indigenous communities. For example, at the start of the pandemic, 32 of 49 communities from the Nishnawbe Aski Nation lacked access to high-speed internet, making online learning largely impossible.¹⁸⁷ While national commitments to broadband infrastructure are important, the arrival of COVID-19 highlights the need for immediate solutions for providing access, including subsidies and loaners, but also scalable solutions that can run on lower-speed networks, smart phones and telephones.¹⁸⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Despite broader economic challenges, employers must strengthen their learning budgets and commit to reskilling.¹⁸⁹ Governments should consider what works in terms of incentivizing more collaboration and investments, as well as innovative approaches such as broadening employer-based skills development and work-integrated learning to strengthen engagement. Coordination across departments and levels of government is needed to maximize investments in programs aimed at supporting workforce entry, reskilling and upskilling, whether for Canadians in general or specific equity-seeking groups. Stronger emphasis on a consistent framework to define, assess, develop and utilize skills is needed to reduce friction in the system but also to remove barriers and biases faced by women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, racialized people, young people and other diverse groups.

Including an intersectional lens¹⁹⁰ is necessary for the federal government's pandemic recovery program, as well as recognizing the horizontal linkages between programs and policies. The recovery from COVID-19 represents a great opportunity to “build back better” and more inclusively by addressing barriers that not only existed before the pandemic but which have been exacerbated and made even more salient by it. Ensuring equitable access is critical, and fundamental investments in infrastructures such as broadband internet, childcare and social supports are essential to levelling the playing field. This is especially the case when it comes to the learning opportunities needed to help workers meet the challenges of the ongoing, and pandemic-accelerated, shift to digital.



Any programs funded by the federal government, as well as provincial and territorial governments, designed to support businesses and/or specifically targeting skills training must embed gender and diversity targets, as well as accountability mechanisms for stakeholders. In business, “what gets measured gets done” and the same logic needs to be applied here. The business case for diversity is clear and compelling^{191, 192, 193} and, as such, warrants having clear targets to promote and achieve diversity and inclusion as a key business success factor.

Along with regulatory frameworks (e.g., Bill C-25,¹⁹⁴ and the **Accessibility Canada Act**) and voluntary programs (e.g., the **30% Club**), we need clear pathways, tools, training and supports for organizations seeking to improve their diversity and inclusion practices. There are opportunities to develop innovative approaches and to leverage existing programs that will help develop capacity in employers to advance diversity and inclusion. Organizations large and small across sectors should be encouraged to benchmark diversity and inclusion and develop comprehensive strategies that link diversity and inclusion to their corporate goals and objectives. Specifically, they need strategies that address:

1. LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

- a. Understand and communicate the strategic importance of diversity and inclusion
- b. Provide senior level support – leaders must set the tone from the top
- c. Embed diversity and inclusion in strategy and risk frameworks
- d. Ensure appropriate policies are in place and matched by robust accountability frameworks

2. HUMAN RESOURCES PRACTICES

- a. Ensure the objective definition of the skills and tasks that are required
- b. Expand the recruitment pool
- c. Ensure inclusive selection processes and procedures
- d. Make sure that career development, mentoring and sponsorship programs are in place
- e. Develop other supports such as employee resource groups
- f. Create mandatory diversity and inclusion training

3. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, WHICH REINFORCES BELONGING AND INCLUSION THROUGH

- a. Employee engagement surveys
- b. Appropriate policies and procedures
- c. Values and symbols

4. MEASUREMENT AND TRACKING

- a. Assess representation, set and track targets for representation on the board, in leadership and across the organization
- b. Assess the diversity of customers, clients and program recipients

5. MAINSTREAMING DIVERSITY THROUGH THE VALUE CHAIN

- a. Apply a gender and diversity lens to every stage of the organization's processes, including procurement; research; product, program and services delivery; sales; marketing and support

6. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TALENT PIPELINE AND OUTREACH

- a. Consider gender and diversity through engagement with partners including through outreach, government relations, and philanthropic initiatives, pathways to employment and services

Finally, bridging the digital divide must be understood as vital to supporting all other skills and employment strategies. Unequal internet access risks exacerbating existing inequalities in education and training. We need a comprehensive strategy to ensure all citizens have access to networks and devices, and the skills they need to use them, including members of equity-seeking groups, those living in rural and remote regions, and those from less-privileged economic backgrounds.¹⁹⁵

In the context of a changing workplace landscape, it is critical to recognize the ways in which taken for granted approaches may reinforce systemic barriers. We need to challenge the status quo and embrace innovative approaches to building on the skills and capacities people have rather than focusing on what they lack. We need to support truly innovative and scalable approaches to creating alternative pathways to employment that are more focused on skills. These approaches will need to engage equity-seeking groups in trades and technology jobs, in bridging programs, and in alternative pathways to developing in demand skills, such as the use of micro-credentials, entrepreneurial training, and work-integrated learning — all while fostering equality of access and true inclusion. Using evidence-based approaches to defining, assessing, developing and utilizing skills, and to addressing both the supply and demand sides of the equation, will all help to ensure that Canada has the workforce it needs to grow and that all members of this workforce have access to the opportunities they deserve.

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