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# Managing Transformation in Disrupted Sectors

Policy Recommendations and Best  
Practices

DR. LORI TURNBULL



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From July 2015 until July 2017, she was on secondment to the Privy Council Office, first as a Policy Adviser in the Machinery of Government Secretariat, then as Departmental Liaison to the Office of the Minister of Democratic Institutions, and finally as a Policy Adviser at the Priorities and Planning Secretariat.

Her book *Democratizing the Constitution: Reforming Responsible Government*, co-authored with Mark Jarvis and the late Peter Aucoin, won the Donner Prize in 2011 and the Donald Smiley Prize in 2012.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It goes without saying that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted and transformed our lives. How we live and work has changed, with many working from home — some permanently — and many sectors and industries facing prolonged disruption. Industries have been forced to either reimagine themselves or cease to exist and job losses have shocked the economy — in Ontario alone 355,000 jobs were lost in 2020. Yet the effects of this economic shock are not distributed equally across income brackets. A report by CIBC Economics showed job losses tended to be low-paying positions in the service industry, while higher-earning Canadians experienced net gains in employment.

As vaccines roll out across the country and we can start to think and plan more meaningfully around recovery, there is a critical need for public, private and not-for-profit partners to work together to build a new and resilient economy. This means developing co-ordinated plans for building new skills, recovering and/or reimagining sectors of our economy and redesigning social programs to meet the needs of workers and employers. Four key areas to consider are inclusive economic growth, how vulnerable sectors can reskill for future needs, the value of lifelong learning (and how educational institutions and employers can play a role in facilitating it), and how social programs can help industries, sectors and workers navigate economic disruption.

In order to build strong sectors and rebuild those sectors that are struggling, we need to understand how our work and lives have changed, and not just because of COVID-19. There was already a shift to more flexible work arrangements, the creation of social programs to provide support for a changing economy and workforce, and jobs eliminated or transformed by automation and artificial intelligence. At the same time, the proliferation of non-standard work and the gig economy means we can no longer assume a worker will pursue a unidirectional career path in a single sector or area of expertise. The changing nature of work means all sectors will need to undertake some degree of restructuring to attract talent and remain competitive. The pandemic both exposed and, in some cases, worsened inequities in our society. Knowing what we know now, there is an inescapable imperative to steer economic recovery and growth towards equity and inclusion.

Even before COVID-19, post-secondary institutions were under pressure to become more flexible and responsive to the needs of learners and employers. The transformation of work means learning and skills-building must evolve as well. The adoption of micro-credentials programming — defined as certification of assessed competencies that are additional, alternate, complementary to, or a component of a formal qualification — is one such way to address these needs. Another is through an employer-created ecosystem of shared training. Employers who make lifelong learning a priority by listening to employees and finding ways to engage them in training opportunities and career advancement are more likely to keep their best people. At the same time, there are lessons to be learned from industries that have survived and thrived

through disruption, as well as those that have failed to navigate industry transformation. We need to learn from the past while we look for innovative ways of working together to rebuild the economy.

## **We need to plan for inevitable change as all sectors will need to adapt and change at some point.**

To achieve these goals, we need to plan for inevitable change as all sectors, no matter how resilient, will need to adapt and change at some point to stay alive. Businesses and governments also need to take an inclusive approach to recruitment and hiring through data-driven practices to attract the broadest pool of talent. And it is important to bridge the gaps in the social safety net to catch those affected by the disruption that COVID-19 has caused. It is in our best interest to ensure workers can keep their jobs or are supported as they seek new opportunities, are recognized for their skill sets, and are offered training programs that lead to employment. With the right tools, workers, employers and sectors can fortify themselves in a new economy.

# INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed how we live and work. This disruption is experienced differently across organizations and sectors, some of which will never be the same. Because of the need for physical distancing, remote work has become the norm for many. However, essential workers continue to populate physical workspaces, which puts them at far greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 than those who work from home. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business has identified the following sectors as being particularly at risk due to pandemic-related closures and disruptions:

- **Accommodation and food services;**
- **Arts, entertainment and recreation;**
- **Transportation;**
- **Retail trade;**
- **Manufacturing; and**
- **Oil and gas extraction.**

Together, these sectors account for roughly 25 percent of Canada's economic output.<sup>1</sup> Factors such as demand for products and services, proximity to others when working, and availability of workers have contributed, and will continue to contribute, to the decline of these industries.

Job losses have shocked the economy throughout the pandemic. In 2020, 355,000 jobs were lost in Ontario alone. A report from the Financial Accountability Office in the province reveals young workers were the most affected group overall, with youth unemployment reaching 22 percent. Accommodation and food services was the most devastated sector with 110,000 jobs lost, while Peterborough and Windsor experienced the greatest declines in employment, at 13.5 percent and 10.9 percent respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Across Canada, the unemployment rate jumped to 13 percent in April 2020, roughly a month into the first COVID-19 lockdown. As restrictions eased throughout the summer, however, the economy bounced back: 80 percent of the three million jobs lost in March and April were recovered by the fall.<sup>3</sup> Yet the economic upswing was not to last. Second and third waves of the pandemic, with new and more dangerous variants on the rise, brought new lockdowns and additional job losses. Canada lost 213,000 jobs in January 2021 as new restrictions were imposed to stop the spread of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

The effects of the economic shock brought on by the pandemic are not distributed equally across income brackets. A report by [CIBC Economics](#) showed job losses resulting from COVID-19 closures in 2020 tended to be low-paying positions in the service industry; the hardest-hit workers were those making the least money (with an hourly wage of under \$13.91). However, higher-earning Canadians experienced net gains in employment at the same time as opportunities to spend disposable income dried up. This is an example of



how our experience with COVID-19 has revealed, and even compounded, pre-existing socioeconomic inequities. As vaccines roll out across the country and we can start to think and plan more meaningfully around recovery, there is a critical need for public, private and not-for-profit partners to work together to build a new and resilient economy. This means developing co-ordinated plans for building new skills, recovering and/or reimagining sectors of our economy and redesigning social programs to meet the needs of workers and employers going forward.

The objective of this paper is to provide an analysis of how workers, employers and sectors can fortify themselves in a new economy. There are lessons to be learned from industries that have survived and thrived through disruption, as well as those that have failed to navigate industry transformation. The rebirth of the shipbuilding sector provides an example of how collaboration between government, an employer and a post-secondary institution was able to breathe new life into the marine industry by recruiting, training and supporting a new and diverse workforce to use collaboration, data and critical thinking to solve problems. Other sectors have not fared so well when faced with disruption. An example of this is the impact and after-effects of the closure of Cape Breton coal mines on workers and the community.

As 2021 rolls forward, the sectors most affected by COVID-19 are forced to consider how best to manage a path through the current crisis to keep the lights on and staff in place. It is essential for us to learn from the past while we look for innovative ways of working together to rebuild the economy. It is in our best interest to ensure workers can keep their jobs or are supported as they seek new opportunities, are recognized for their skill sets, and are offered training programs that lead to employment. To that end, this paper is structured around the following questions:

1. What does inclusive economic growth mean?
2. How will vulnerable sectors reskill for the needs of the future workforce?
3. How can social programs better support the efforts of Canadian industries, sectors and workers as they navigate disruptions such as the current pandemic or automation?
4. How should universities, colleges and other educational institutions support this process and what is the role of employers?

# REALIZING INCLUSIVE GROWTH

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines inclusive growth as “economic growth that is distributed fairly across society and creates opportunities for all.”<sup>5</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic both exposed and, in some cases, worsened inequities in our society. Knowing what we know now, there is an inescapable imperative to steer economic recovery and growth towards equity and inclusion. We risk a severe setback with respect to women’s socioeconomic well-being, as the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 has disproportionately affected women’s “finances and prospects.”<sup>6</sup> [A May 2021 Statistics Canada report](#) confirms women have been more severely affected by COVID-19 job losses — the services sector was harder hit than the goods sector and women’s employment is more concentrated in the service sector.

We have also learned a lot about the social determinants of health. The data from the Statistics Canada report shows that racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to get sick with COVID-19, and social determinants of health, including economic and social conditions as well as access to quality health care and education, greatly affect these outcomes.<sup>7</sup> According to Toronto Public Health, 79 percent of the city’s residents who became ill with COVID-19 between May and November 2020, and 71 percent of those hospitalized, identified as racialized.<sup>8</sup> Further, racialized people are especially present on the front lines in the fight against COVID-19, as they are disproportionally represented among essential workers.

The pandemic timeline overlaps with the rise in societal consciousness around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The disproportionate impact of the public health crisis on Indigenous, Black and other racialized people is clear and the past 15 months have [accelerated employer DEI conversations](#). In rebuilding Canada’s economy, there is an opportunity to [ensure workplaces are more inclusive](#). The pressure to apply an equity lens to economic growth strategies post-COVID-19 is key to growth. Economic recovery must be inclusive, equitable and restorative.



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# REVITALIZING SECTORS, RESKILLING WORKERS

As mentioned earlier, some sectors were harder hit by COVID-19 closures than others, and as businesses have been able to reopen for periods of time during the pandemic, some sectors have rebounded better than others. For example, the phased approach to reopening, as well as the reality of opening only to have to close again, has created significant barriers and challenges to the tourism and hospitality sector. In August 2020, employment in accommodation and food services was still more than 20 percent below what it was the previous February. At the same time, employment activity in manufacturing and construction sectors had been restored to 90 percent of pre-COVID levels.<sup>9</sup>

The key to building strong sectors and rebuilding those sectors that are struggling is understanding how our work and lives have changed, and not just because of COVID-19. Even before the lockdowns started, there was a shift toward remote work, [more flexible work arrangements](#), calls for accessible education and training programs, and the creation of social programs that would provide more adequate support for a changing economy and workforce. Artificial intelligence and automation have eliminated and/or transformed some jobs formerly done by humans.<sup>10</sup> Workers most at risk of losing employment due to automation are those between the [ages of 16 and 24](#) and those over age 55, those without post-secondary education, those with low employment income and those who work in specific sectors such as business management, public administration and manufacturing.<sup>11</sup> Further to this, the proliferation of non-standard work and the gig economy means we can no longer assume a worker will pursue a unidirectional career path in a single sector or area of expertise.<sup>12</sup> Gone are the days when a high school graduate could find a job with a single employer from the age of 18 and retire with a pension.

**The changing nature of work means all sectors will need to undertake some degree of restructuring to attract talent and remain competitive. Strong sectors begin with skilled, satisfied workers. Employers must recruit and retain an inclusive, energized workforce with diverse skill sets.**

The COVID-19 period has had the effect of normalizing remote work for many and 90 percent of Canadians feel they work at least as well, or even better, from home.<sup>13</sup> For some, the continuation of remote work post-pandemic could help facilitate worker satisfaction and a healthier work/life balance. Further, research shows the expansion of remote work opportunities can help attract a more diverse and inclusive workforce, for example [increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities](#). Non-place-based work can both create a larger applicant pool and remove barriers such as a high cost of living.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, the economic shocks of COVID-19 have not been endured equally across demographics and sectors; we know

women's lives and work have been more disrupted than men's lives. To protect the prosperity of women and girls, employers need to bring a gendered lens to their approaches to recruitment and retention. In addition to providing competitive working conditions, salaries and benefits packages for women, employers must make the [strategic choice to retain women](#) in large numbers at all levels of the organization.



**In recent years, greater awareness of society's impact on the environment, as well as competition from cheaper producers overseas, has led to much transformation (and inevitably disruption) in Canada's natural resources sectors.**

## NAVIGATING DISRUPTION: SUCCESS & FAILURE

In the past, some sectors have shown leadership in transforming and rebuilding themselves. They can provide guidance and inspiration for other sectors trying to do the same. The [National Shipbuilding Strategy](#), launched in 2014, provides an example of an industry rebuilding itself — in this case Canada's marine industry — following a period of decline. Irving Shipbuilding Inc. (ISI) faced mutually reinforcing challenges: It needed to invest in infrastructure and innovation to make the industry competitive again, while at the same time attract a strong, diverse pool of experienced workers, many of whom had moved on to more stable industries. To meet these demands, ISI, thanks to the support of the federal government, invested millions in a modernized shipyard in Halifax and announced the creation of 8,200 new jobs across the country, 3,500 of them in Nova Scotia. These jobs represented an opportunity for a 30-year career, a significant attraction for skilled workers, and the sheer number of positions available made it possible to transform the workforce. ISI worked with Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) to develop appropriate programming to train the new workforce and to mobilize diverse talent, including all-female, Indigenous and African Nova Scotia cohorts.<sup>15</sup>

With an economy that relies on abundant natural resources, Canadian business is particularly well-versed in confronting and responding to a boom-and-bust cycle. In recent years, greater awareness of society's impact on the environment, as well as competition from cheaper producers overseas, has led to much transformation (and inevitably disruption) in Canada's natural resources sectors. One of those disruptions was the underground coal mines in Cape Breton, offering an example of an industry where a worker-centric collaborative process was missing, in a part of the country where unemployment rates are already high.

For 280 years, Cape Breton was a coal mining region that was historically a leader in the industry, providing the driving power for the industries of Quebec and Ontario.<sup>16</sup> In 2001, the last underground coal mine in Cape Breton closed, putting 270 people out of work and ending the commercial coal industry. Over the previous year, roughly 1,100 miners had been laid off or retired.<sup>17</sup> Efforts to privatize the industry had all ended in failure. For some Canadians, the federal government's decision had not come fast enough. Coal mining in

Cape Breton was a floundering industry and a money pit for taxpayers. The federal government had spent \$1.8 billion since 1967 on DEVCO (Cape Breton Development Corporation) operations and \$86 million in the previous year alone. The industry had been volatile over the years, but in the good years had been the strength of Cape Breton's depressed economy. Also, coal mining was, and remains, a defining feature of the history and culture of Cape Breton Island.

One former coal miner described the federal government's announcement of the closure as a "drive-by shooting." The devastation was not only economic in nature; it was emotional and cultural as well. Miners who were used to working shifts together for decades were now on their own. Mines in Cape Breton were dirty and dangerous — 300 metres below the surface and stretching for eight kilometres under the Atlantic Ocean. At the beginning of each shift, miners rode in metal cars for 45 minutes to reach their worksite. More than 1,400 lives were lost in the industry over the years as a result of explosions, fires and other accidents.<sup>18</sup> But mining had been a guaranteed job for workers of varying skill levels. In closing Cape Breton's coal mines, the government failed to take a proactive approach, there was no opportunity to explore partnerships with local institutions or businesses, and workers without transferable skills were left with severance and little to do. The industry didn't evolve, it just closed down.

The key considerations from the Cape Breton example are three-fold:

1. It is vital to recognize the skills of individuals who will need work when sector disruption leaves them unemployed.
2. Assistance is needed to help workers find a way to transfer skill sets, with opportunities for upskilling and cross-skilling, to a new sector.
3. The failure to adequately support and redeploy workers can have devastating consequences for individuals, families and economies.

When the coal industry failed, government handed out severance packages and did not take a proactive approach towards reskilling former miners. This was a loss to the still-depressed economy, which made an even harder shift toward tourism and hospitality — industries heavily impacted by COVID-19. Mining was not seen as a skill or a credential, but as hard work done by men, many of them with little or no post-secondary education. Economic development activity shifted heavily toward tourism, hospitality and real estate, and many former miners were left behind without the opportunity to transition their skills to these sectors or to re-skill. This example shows the value of education, credentials, the recognition of skills and the need for government to proactively work alongside industry and community to protect workers from employment vulnerability when industries fail.

# LIFELONG LEARNING

The partnership between Irving and NSCC is a perfect example of the positive role educational institutions can play in the future of work and skills. Even before COVID-19, these institutions were under pressure to become more flexible and responsive to the needs of learners and employers. The transformation of work means learning and skills-building must evolve as well. Regardless of whether an individual changes jobs or develops a singular career path throughout their working life, everyone will need to learn new skills, diversify their expertise and credentials and find ways to modify their talent.

Post-secondary education (PSE) institutions, in particular universities, have been criticized for not being flexible and responsive enough to the needs of the workforce. Historically, the focus at universities has been on degree programs that are time consuming, costly and do not necessarily prepare a student for a professional environment. To be clear, universities have many strategic goals, including leadership and excellence in research, academic teaching and learning, thought leadership, and community innovation. Today's universities craft visionary strategic plans filled with inspirational language around creating an enriching experience for students and scholars. These plans identify strategic goals that go beyond skills-building, but it is important for universities and other educational institutions to stay grounded in the needs of individuals, governments and employers. Otherwise, their capacity to meet their strategic goals, particularly the ones around financial stability and community engagement, will be limited.

Many PSE institutions have embraced this reality by generating a roster of micro-credentials, which [Colleges and Institutes Canada \(CICan\)](#) defines as “certification of assessed competencies that is additional, alternate, complementary to, or a component of a formal qualification.” These micro-credentials have become so prolific that CICan has developed a national framework that identifies common definitions and sets standards for quality assurance.<sup>19</sup> This way, both learners and employers can understand which micro-credentials they are looking for and can trust that the curriculum has integrity.<sup>20</sup>

Educational institutions need to be proactive in ensuring expansion of micro-credentials supports efforts to build diverse and inclusive workforces. In a report called [Is the Future Micro? Unbundled learning for flexibility and access](#), the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University explains that those who enrol in and complete micro-credential programming tend to be either Caucasian or Asian and are already employed. The flexible nature of micro-credentials has the potential to make them more attractive to those who face barriers to education. There is a need to ensure both the content and the delivery of micro-credentials is desirable for diverse populations.

The expansion of micro-credentials will be essential to post-pandemic economic recovery. Provincial government funding to support both the development of micro-credentialling programs and to assist those looking for an accessible way of retraining will help to increase the employment rate.<sup>21</sup> Federally run supports like the [Canada Training Benefit](#) also provide a financial incentive to those seeking to retrain or upskill.

While formalized training where a student receives a recognized credit or certification is ideal, there are opportunities for employers to create an ecosystem for shared training. A pre-pandemic [report by the U.S. Work Institute](#) identifies career development as the greatest reason employees leave their job. Employees know what they want for their careers, they expect more from their employers and they understand that lifelong learning is a part of their career progression. Employers who make lifelong learning a priority by listening to employees and finding ways to engage them in training opportunities and career advancement are more likely to keep their best people. There is a clear incentive for employers to work with educational institutions to identify demands, opportunities and gaps in programming. These relationships will work best when the employer clearly points to the need for skills training in a particular area, and an educational institution works to create a rigorous, comprehensive and accessible curriculum. This creates the opportunity for employees to engage in skills-building delivered by an accredited institution, while being paid to learn. This is even better if the training opportunity is delivered virtually or delivered locally.

Some employers are embracing employee-driven career development and have provided their own on-site learning opportunities for employees. At [AVIT Manufacturing](#) in Peterborough, Ont., more than 60 percent of the workforce has participated in on-the-job upskilling or cross-skilling. Providing these opportunities for employees is a smart way for companies to prevent skills gaps from occurring by anticipating needs and offering training in those areas. Programs that build skills are rewarding for employees, increase employee retention, create mentorship opportunities and help to keep the business competitive. AVIT, an SME (small and medium-sized enterprise), has also collaborated with larger employers on their supply chain to offer learning opportunities outside of their skills base.

In this case, the only risk is that skills built “in house” will not be recognized as formal credentials on the job market. Micro-credentials from educational institutions tend to come with some sort of certification and/or recognition of their legitimacy by an independent body, such as CIfCan via the national framework for micro-credentials. One of the objectives of this framework is to maintain quality assurance across programs so that the credential is recognized as legitimate by employers as well as students. On-the-job training helps an employee build skills, but without a formal credential or certification, the skill set might not be recognized on the wider job market.

On the other hand, if companies work together and communicate consistently on common standards for internal training programs, this risk would be mitigated by a consensus around standards for training. Building an ecosystem for shared training requires a collaborative effort, where employers small and large, government and institutions work together to provide training in an accessible manner, and where employees can learn on the job, while receiving recognized credentials.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to build toward inclusive growth, ensure opportunities for lifelong learning and give appropriate support to workers and sectors, the following recommendations are offered:

### 1. Plan for inevitable change.

We know all sectors, no matter how resilient, will need to adapt and change at some point to stay alive. We also know not all sectors will last forever; Cape Breton coal mining is just one example of this reality. The end of that industry was not only predictable but expected, and we ought to have done a better job of planning for mine closures and the job losses and socioeconomic devastation that would result. Communities build around industries; the culture and identity in a community or region is wrapped around its economic engine. Government, civil society, companies and educational institutions all have a role to play in anticipating change in industries and co-ordinating plans for how to reskill and redeploy workers, if it becomes necessary to do so.

### 2. Take an inclusive data-driven approach to education and hiring.

Businesses and governments need to take an inclusive approach to recruitment and hiring to attract the broadest pool of talent. Data-driven recruitment practices can be very helpful in writing an inclusive job advertisement, identifying an inclusive candidate pool, reducing the effect of bias in assessing candidates, ensuring equitable pay and maintaining employee engagement.<sup>22</sup> However, there are drawbacks and limitations to the data-driven approach. For example, the data itself can be biased, particularly if we are measuring the wrong things or if we are not taking a comprehensive approach to what data we are collecting. This is why it is so important to have a diverse talent pool working on data collection and measurement. There is a responsibility for educational institutions to ensure an inclusive approach to

recruitment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs so that the data and knowledge we create is authentic, reliable and reflective of diverse perspectives and realities.

### **3. Bridge the gaps in the social safety net.**

The changing nature of work has created gaps in our social safety net and the disruption caused by COVID-19 has exposed (and in some cases widened) some of these gaps. We know young workers, lower income earners, women, single working-age adults and racialized individuals are disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of COVID-19. Further, precarious work had been on the rise even before the pandemic. The percentage of gig workers rose from 5.5 percent in 2005 to 8.2 percent in 2016<sup>23</sup> and to 17 percent in 2019.<sup>24</sup> As researchers Elle Ziegler and Karen McCallum point out, some are attracted to gig work because it is flexible, often not place-based and creates opportunities to apply one's skill set in new ways. However, others are pushed to gig work because options for stable employment are limited. The business closures and job losses during the pandemic have exacerbated this problem.

Of course, it is somewhat misleading to talk about "Canada's" social safety net. Many services, benefits and protections are offered by provincial and municipal governments, which means the breadth of social safety nets varies depending on location. There are federal programs that apply broadly, like employment insurance, pension and disability benefits, and income assistance, but provinces differ when it comes to provision of services such as health care and child benefits. The shift to remote work during the pandemic has exposed the inequities across the country with respect to broadband access; if working from home is to continue, we need to fix this.

The federal budget of April 2021 made a promise to pursue a national daycare strategy, which would be transformational for parents and children. It is an essential step in guarding against the "she-cession" that will occur without deliberate action and planning through social policy. But it is not enough on its own. To protect workers in all sectors, governments, industries and educational institutions need to work together to provide meaningful and affordable opportunities for lifelong learning. Educational institutions can work with governments and employers to identify needs and then develop programs and credentials to train new workforces. Student and worker recruitment must be inclusive and data driven. Federal and provincial governments, as well as employers, can help by offering financial support for reskilling and upskilling opportunities to both employed and unemployed people.

# CONCLUSION

Despite the disruption COVID-19 has caused, it has also served to shine a spotlight on areas of concern that, in many cases, have been exacerbated by the pandemic, creating a sense of urgency. This is an opportunity to create policy that builds toward inclusive growth, ensures opportunities for lifelong learning and gives appropriate support to workers and sectors. It is in our best interest to ensure workers can keep their jobs or are supported as they seek new opportunities, are recognized for their skill sets, and are offered training programs that lead to employment. With the right tools, workers, employers and sectors can fortify themselves in a new economy.

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