



Opinion

Canada's future workforce must be truly diverse and highly skilled at problem-solving

Diversity, essential skills, digital learning tools, and the skills mismatch are not new topics of discussion, but world-changing events have impressed upon us the urgency of ushering in such progress.



Karen Creditor & Shaun Thorson

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Last month, thousands of Canadian students graduated and will have to face quickly changing workforce realities.

For policy makers, parents, and teachers, the “new normal” workplace and evolving labour demands should make them question if our current system is geared towards teaching young people the most relevant skills, in the most effective ways.

As we contemplate the future of skills development, conversations with our many education and corporate partners across Canada have led us to identify recommendations for decision makers and stakeholders to consider:

We must increase the promotion of essential occupations. The pandemic exposed our reliance on many occupations that are of-



Increased calls for concrete anti-racism measures have reawakened our resolve to insist on greater engagement with youth who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized, write Karen Creditor and Shaun Thorson. Photograph courtesy of Skills/Compétences Canada

ten overlooked yet critical to our economy. Jobs related to building maintenance (keeping the lights on in our hospitals), transportation (getting deliveries to the supermarket), and manufacturing (PPE and ventilator production) have proven to be imperative in the fight against COVID-19.

Canada was already facing a serious skills mismatch before the pandemic. And now the retrofiting of service-based businesses, as well as the expansion of IT and other infrastructure projects will only heighten the demand for these occupations. So where will this skilled workforce come from? And how are we making sure students are fully aware of these career opportunities?

We must insist on a more diverse skilled workforce. Increased calls for concrete anti-racism measures have reawakened our resolve to insist on greater engagement with youth who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized.

We must also continue to encourage and support a greater number of women, people with a disability, and folks who belong to the LGBTQ+ community, to enter and remain in skilled trade and technology occupations.

Recognizing the immense social and economic benefits related to truly inclusive and diverse workforces, we are committed to working closely with our partners

to implement such opportunities. The traditional face of our sectors—white and male—will not meet our growing labour demands, nor does it lead to the just and inclusive society we seek and need.

Skills/Compétences Canada's (SCC) work with Indigenous students across Canada, as well as its women in trades programs, are just a couple of examples of initiatives that have had a direct positive impact on under-represented groups. We, and our sector writ-large, must and will step up efforts in this regard.

We must develop more in-context virtual learning opportunities. Like so many other sectors, we have found that the online experience is well suited for some aspects of learning but falls short in other regards.

Skilled trades are inherently hands-on, so it is not surprising that many viewed learning alternatives as inappropriate for this sector. However, we have come to see in the last few months that there are indeed some elements that can be taught effectively virtually, with the proper supports in place.

For example, while theory and health and safety can certainly be effectively taught online, we must consider the learner in this approach. Those pursuing such

occupations usually thrive in an applied-learning environment and nothing can replace the in-person energy of learning how to machine precision parts, adjust a clutch, or wire an electrical panel.

We must focus on problem solving. The pandemic is an extreme happening that has called on all of us to tap into the essential skill of problem-solving on some level.

Skilled trade and technology professionals solve problems every day. Whether it's figuring out why a client's car is making an odd sound, how a company's IT infrastructure was compromised, or how to fix a building's AC system, problem-solving is the essence of our sectors' jobs.

The more deeply skilled trade and technology training is embedded into our curriculum, and the more employers create apprenticeship partnerships and innovative work-integrated-learning field placements, the closer we will be to raising the next generation of sophisticated problem solvers.

Diversity, essential skills, digital learning tools, and the skills mismatch are not new topics of discussion in our sectors. However, world-changing events have impressed upon us the urgency of ushering in such progress. We have little time to deliberate anymore.

Rather, we must actively collaborate across sectors to create a national skills action plan that will ensure that Canadian youth and our economy prosper in the years ahead—despite any health, economic, or political challenge that will come our way.

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