

The Next Polytechnic Challenge

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While the economy is cyclical—moving between expansion, peak, contraction and trough—the reality is that a highly skilled workforce is always in demand. At every stage of the economic cycle, employers need workers capable of flexing to accommodate the challenges of the day, whether implementing new technology, entering new markets, streamlining operations or pivoting to a new business model. Regardless of the circumstances, skills don't go out of style.

In recent years, Canada's polytechnics have reported hundreds of thousands of continuing education registrations annually. This illustrates that, while barriers to lifelong learning remain, Canadians are choosing to stay abreast of new developments in their industry or occupation, or pivoting to new careers in growing sectors.

In a recent study, we found that more than 90% of Canadian workers and employers believe skills development remains important regardless of the stage of one's career. Nearly half of the 1,500 workers we surveyed said lifelong learning has become critical for both job advancement and career change. Meanwhile, employers said supporting lifelong learning among their employees improves competitiveness, increases retention, supports economic recovery and facilitates internal job transitions.


With the job market changing so quickly, the challenge most learners and their employers point to is a lack of confidence

about what skills will be important in the years ahead and where to go to develop them. As experts in continuing education and lifelong learning, Canada's polytechnics are clearly a good place to start.

Yet, we need to consider if we are also positioned to proactively address the navigation challenge. Can we capture sector-, region- and occupation-specific labour market data and map it to the more than 17,000 short-cycle courses available across the network of polytechnics? Are polytechnics able to step into the role of trusted lifelong learning advisors?

The alternatives aren't very appealing. We could leave learners to figure it out for themselves, perhaps leading to low-cost, low-return solutions on the other end of an internet search. We could wait for someone else to develop a matching tool: a government initiative, reflecting their interest in a more efficient and productive labour market, or a business organization with training of their own to offer.

I can't help thinking that this is a skills challenge ideally suited to Canada's polytechnics. Their fundamental place at the intersection of workforce skills and workplace productivity positions them to share insights and expertise, courses and programs that respond to the growing call for lifelong learning. The polytechnic model has always attracted learners ready for the workforce and, in today's environment, that could easily extend to those ready for what comes next.

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