

National Roundtable on the Adult Labour Force

Queen Elizabeth Hotel

Montreal, September 16, 2002

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Introduction

Rising and changing skills requirements in the economy, the constant pace of technological change and demographic pressures pose major challenges for the Canadian workforce. As part of the federal government's Innovation Strategy, *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians* invites groups and individuals to take part in a national dialogue on what needs to be done to ensure that Canada has the world-class workforce it needs.

The National Roundtable on the Adult Labour Force (September 16, 2002; Montreal) was one in a series of consultations where HRDC asked key labour market players to provide views and advice on the diagnostic and milestones which were set out in *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians*, and on how these milestones might best be achieved.

The Roundtable was organized by the Canadian Labour and Business Centre (CLBC) in conjunction with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). The Roundtable was co-chaired by Barbara Byers, Executive Vice-President of the Canadian Labour Congress and Gilles Taillon, President of Le Conseil du patronat du Québec. It brought together 40 senior representatives from business, labour, the academic community, voluntary sector, literacy and other groups to discuss roles and responsibilities, explore priorities and identify action steps for equipping Canada's workforce for success in the global, knowledge-based economy.¹

Objectives

The key objective of the Roundtable was to achieve broad consensus that *Knowledge Matters* accurately describes the main approaches that are needed to address serious workforce quality and demographic issues and to enhance adult participation in the labour market. It was also hoped that the discussion would position adult workforce learning and the need to build a lifelong learning culture as shared, long-term responsibilities of government, the private sector and other partners.

Goals

The specific goal of the Roundtable was to discuss milestones and actions proposed in *Knowledge Matters* in relation to:

- increasing learning opportunities for adult workers;
- increasing private sector investment in the workforce;
- improving adult literacy levels; and
- increasing the supply of labour including the skilled trades.

¹ A list of participants is attached as Appendix A.

Process

To set the context for the discussion, Wayne Wouters, Deputy Minister of HRDC provided an overview of *Knowledge Matters*. A panel discussion followed involving Perrin Beatty, President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters; Brian Payne, President, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada; and Sam Shaw, President, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. Participants then broke into discussion groups to address four key challenge areas identified in *Knowledge Matters*:

- A. Learning Opportunities for Adult Canadians;
- B. Encouraging Employers to Invest More in Skills Development;
- C. Meeting Adult Skills Development Needs; and
- D. Increasing Apprenticeship Completion Rates.

The Minister of Human Resources Development, the Hon. Jane Stewart, joined the discussion during the afternoon and responded to the conclusions and recommendations which discussion group leaders reported to a plenary session at the end of the day.

The following report captures the highlights of the National Roundtable on the Adult Labour Force.

Roundtable on the Adult Labour Force: Highlights of the Discussions

Setting the Context

Mr. Wouters stressed that key challenges for Canada are building a culture of lifelong learning, promoting workplace skills development, and increasing labour force participation and supply. He noted the importance of encouraging Canadians to combine work and learning, and of expanding the knowledge base to improve information sharing. Mr. Wouters urged participants to be frank and open in offering advice on questions such as:

- Does *Knowledge Matters* diagnose accurately the skills and learning challenges facing Canada? Does it set out the right broad policy directions?
- Do the milestones need to be strengthened or clarified?
- What actions should the different partners – governments, business, labour, educators and individuals – take in meeting skills and learning challenges?

Mr. Beatty noted that Canada is moving from chronic structural unemployment toward serious skills shortages. He saw new partnerships among all of the key players as essential to improving our investments in education and training in order to meet unprecedented demographic and skills

challenges. Mr. Beatty believed that *Knowledge Matters* captures the problem fairly well and that the milestones are sound. He cautioned, however, that it will take many years of sustained effort to build a learning culture and asked: “Do we have the determination and political will to see it through?”

Mr. Payne pointed to our “world-class workforce” and called on governments and employers to match the commitment of Canadian workers to skills development. He indicated that employers are dealing with the reality of skills shortages, particularly in the skilled trades, and emphasized the need for co-operative approaches to meet this challenge. Pointing out that unions are already active in literacy, basic skills and other workplace learning activities, Mr. Payne emphasized the labour movement’s commitment to working with employers and governments on skills and learning issues. He said, “...you will be surprised at what unions can bring to the table.”

Mr. Shaw emphasized that skills are the critical factor in innovation, in economic and productivity growth, and in sustaining communities. He believed that Canada’s skills challenge will be met through increasing post-secondary enrolment and bringing our investment in employer-sponsored training at least up to the level of our main trading partners. Mr. Shaw was confident that Canadian apprentices and journeymen are better trained than in other countries. However, the challenge is to get young people into apprenticeship programs when they complete high school rather than eight years later as is currently the case. He also stressed the vital importance of engaging the growing cohort of Aboriginal youth in apprenticeship and learning.

Learning Opportunities for Adult Canadians

Milestone: Within five years, the number of adult learners increases by one million men and women throughout all segments of society.

Is the Milestone Right?

Participants expressed several reservations about the milestone. One concern was that it did not distinguish between formal and informal learning and should reflect the amount of time actually spent in learning activities as well as the number of people involved. Another concern was that timely data is not available to gauge “interim” progress within the milestone’s five-year time frame. It was suggested that proxy measures, such as library circulation rates, might be useful indicators.

What are the Barriers to Lifelong Learning?

There was consensus that there has been enough talk about barriers to lifelong learning and that there is an “urgent need to move from analysis to action.” Participants called on the federal government, the provinces, educators and employers to recognize that no one party has ownership of learning issues or solutions and that the time has come to get on with the job.

In discussing barriers to adult learning which would have to be overcome in order to reach the milestone, participants focussed on the following issues:

1. *The Cost of Formal Learning*

Many parents will save for their children's post-secondary education, but are reluctant to borrow for their own learning needs. "They are more prepared to take out a car loan than an education loan." Student loan programs mainly support full-time college and university study.

2. *Family Responsibilities*

The time required for family and work responsibilities precludes many adults (particularly women, who bear the brunt of child and elder care) from participating in learning activities. There is a need for flexible learning options

3. *Education Requirements for Apprenticeship*

Several provinces have a Grade 12 entry requirement for apprenticeship training. This sets the bar too high for some trades and cuts off a potential learning avenue for adults who lack a high school diploma.

4. *Small and Remote Communities*

For people residing in small and remote communities, formal learning may mean moving to a larger centre and may also require an extended separation from work. Employers in these areas need special incentives to support employee learning within the community. Failure to develop such mechanisms may draw workers away from communities, and raise important issues about the sustainability of these communities.

Distance education is an option for some people, but many prefer to learn in a group setting and are motivated by the chance for social interaction.

5. *Poor Mechanisms for Engaging "Marginalized" Groups*

"Marginalized" groups, especially people with poor language and reading skills, are largely cut off from learning. Libraries, the Internet and other text-based, self-directed learning tools are not options for them. Many lack self-confidence and do not believe that they can learn. Programs are required that are sensitive to these needs.

Despite support for the "Participaction" approach, there was a clear recognition that people on the margins of the labour market, including Aboriginal Canadians, the long-term unemployed and people with low literacy skills, may not respond to the same motivators as people in the mainstream. They require specialized, individual attention and support. However, demand for these services far outstrips supply.

6. *Incentives and Disincentives in Government Policy*

The federal government should audit its policies and programs to weed out disincentives to learning. A broader interpretation of the Income Tax Act, for example, could allow deductible expenses for a range of learning activities, not just credit courses.

The Employment Insurance Fund could be put to more creative uses. An “experience rating” formula could reward employers who invest in training with credits against their EI premiums, since better trained workers are less likely to need EI benefits.

7. *Federal-Provincial Relations*

Labour Market Development Agreements (LMDAs) can be a “very useful tool for change” but money invested in training is not always used effectively. Participants pointed out that there is no LMDA in Ontario, and urged Ottawa and the provinces to rise above the jurisdictional fray to improve training efforts. Participants believed that HRDC has staked out important ground in *Knowledge Matters* and agreed that adult learning is a national challenge, requiring action at the national level.

Selling Canadians on Learning

Many participants saw a major marketing challenge behind the milestone of a million new adult learners in the next five years. While acknowledging the need for more learning services and facilities, they believed that stakeholders must come together to “explore the factors which motivate people to learn, and build a marketing campaign around these motivators.”

Several recalled how the “Participation Model” had led Canadians toward fitness in the 1960s and 1970s, and proposed a similar approach to promoting learning with a campaign focus “not just on what’s good for you but what’s fun for you.” They also believed that there is a rich history of innovations and success stories in adult learning of which most Canadians are unaware.

Rethinking the Learning System

Most participants saw a need to rethink traditional learning models as we move further into the knowledge-based economy and skills shortages begin to emerge. Some questioned whether our political structures and jurisdictions could accommodate the adjustment challenge. Others were concerned that the traditional workplace learning model lacked incentives for businesses to train employees beyond specific job requirements or to invest in basic skills upgrading.

There was clear support for developing and organizing learning services and resources at the community level. As one participant put it: “Adults will take advantage of learning opportunities that are convenient, fast and close to home.” Some saw this as key to building the critical mass of skilled people that will attract investment to regions and communities. Others thought it was simply more logical to put adult learning in the hands of community decision-makers rather than federal or provincial bureaucrats.

Encouraging Employers to Invest More in Skills Development

Milestone: *Within five years, businesses increase by one-third their annual investment in training per employee.*

Is the Milestone Right?

Participants agreed that businesses will have to train more to succeed in the knowledge-based economy, although several noted with discouragement that “we have been having this kind of discussion for ten years now.” The group agreed that it would be highly desirable for employers to invest more in their workforce, but debated the merits of setting specific targets or time-frames. It was noted that SMEs are very active in informal training. The chief concerns were:

1. “Informal” or “on-the-job” training is difficult to quantify, and there is no base-line against which incremental investments could be measured. “Nearly 85% of firms do informal training but only the formal stuff shows up in Statistics Canada data.” To establish benchmarks and support useful comparisons between industries, provinces and countries, governments should find ways to measure informal training.
2. The business cycle and labour market conditions affect investment decisions. If sales are flat and skilled workers are readily available, companies will train less. These parameters are difficult to project five years down the road. Moreover, conditions will vary enormously from sector to sector: A milestone that is relevant for one sector may not be relevant for another. Milestones should be established only for sectors where the most severe skills shortages are expected.
3. The milestone’s five-year time frame is beyond the planning horizon of most SMEs.

To recognize outputs from informal as well as formal training, it was suggested that the milestone could shift to growth in worker competencies instead of dollars spent.

Some also thought there should be a milestone established for changing employer attitudes about training. This would address the fact that many firms, particularly SMEs, regard training as an expense rather than as an investment with a predicable return on investment.

Roles and Responsibilities for Increasing Training

Participants agreed that training and skills development strategies must engage all stakeholders and suggested the following roles and responsibilities for the key players.

Employers control the main levers and must take the lead in improving Canada’s performance in worker training. Some questioned employer commitment to this objective, pointing to the difficulty which many small firms in Quebec experience in trying to meet the mandated 1% of payroll in training. The competing view, however, was that training, like all other investment decisions, responds to market signals and that employers will boost their training investments when “there is a business case to do so.”

It was clear from the discussion that many employers, generally the larger firms, view worker training as a key to profitability and competitive success. The feeling was, however, that many small firms are not able to conduct a “business case analysis” of training scenarios and often lack the time and resources required to develop or source the training that their workers require.

There was a range of views and ideas on the role *governments* should play. Most believed that public spending on workforce development must increase and that governments must find ways to encourage the private sector to invest more in training. Some favoured a Québec-style, mandated approach. Others rejected this as overly bureaucratic and fraught with measurement problems. They believed that governments should rely more on “carrots” than on “sticks” to encourage training. There was also a suggestion that governments establish a training tax credit program similar to measures which encourage firms to invest in scientific research and development

Participants also felt that the federal government should provide a “clearing house” where all stakeholders could access information on “what works and what doesn’t work” and learn from each other about the best ways to approach training and skills development challenges. There seemed to be wide agreement that all stakeholders, including the provinces, would appreciate federal leadership in this area. For example, the government of Canada could help to make the “business case” for investing in skills development and to improve public understanding of the return on this investment.

Most participants were familiar with or actively involved in *sector councils* in the mining, tourism, construction and textile industries. They believed that sector councils are well placed to promote and facilitate employer sponsored training and could play a constructive role by educating employers, particularly SMEs, workers and others on the business case for training. As one participant put it: “We need to get the rate of return model out there and explain it.” Others thought that sector councils could help their members to “see the linkages between profitability, skills and training.” They also believed that sector councils could document and disseminate information on best practices in training needs identification within their sectors and more broadly.

Participants acknowledged that sector councils currently cover only 25% of the workforce but felt that they could be a growing force in the labour market policy and workforce development. There were concerns, however, that recent changes in HRDC’s funding practices would impede sector councils from achieving their full potential.

Recognizing Exemplary Training Practices

Reaction was mixed when the group was asked whether it would be helpful for the government to formally recognize employers that demonstrate an exemplary commitment to training. One suggestion was that it might help with recruitment since workers would gravitate to firms which offer the best training opportunities. On the other hand, concern was voiced that companies trying to “poach” workers would target firms which displayed the training “seal of approval.” A final thought was that the certification would be useful if it carried a tangible benefit, such as preferred bidder status in government procurement.

There was support for the idea of a government certificate or diploma that could be conferred on workers who complete specified workplace training programs. Participants believed that a meaningful certificate of achievement would promote labour mobility, particularly across provincial borders.

Meeting Adult Skills Development Needs

Milestone: *The number of adult Canadians with low literacy skills is reduced by 25% over the next decade.*

Is the Milestone Right?

On the whole, participants believed the milestone is realistic. At the same time, they cautioned that reducing the number of adults with low literacy skills by 25% might not be sufficient to meet growing skill requirements or to bring Canada's literacy record up to par with other countries. Many clearly believed that the milestone reflects the minimum achievement necessary and that we should be aiming higher.

There was also a good deal of debate over the definition of functional literacy and the meaning or accuracy of literacy data. In particular, the often quoted statistic that one in four high school graduates do not have adequate "essential skills" was challenged. While there was no resolution of this issue, participants recognized the need to be more specific and careful in characterizing literacy problems. The Minister said, "Let's agree that more must be done."

Improving Literacy Training

Participants attributed Canada's literacy problem to a combination of factors, including weaknesses in the K-12 education system and high levels of immigration. However, they were more concerned with addressing the factors that stand in the way of fixing the problem.

Special Problems of SMEs

Effective literacy and basic skills programs are the territory of large employers. SMEs want to be part of the solution, but simply do not know where to start. They are also concerned about the costs and down time which remedial training may entail. Unless training systems adapt to the needs of employers, such firms are more likely to replace workers than to train them. As labour markets tighten and skills shortages emerge, all firms will be more inclined to address the problem. However, they need to know where to turn for help.

Blurred Accountability

Canadians believe that basic education is a public right that should be paid for with public funds. However, they are less clear on who should pay for "second-chance learning." Employers view literacy training as a public expense because it is a skill that people should acquire in primary and secondary school. To frame the literacy problem in public policy terms, participants called for a clearer division of responsibility among employers, individuals, provinces and HRDC for diagnosing literacy problems and financing and delivering literacy and basic skills training.

Accessibility of Training

Literacy training programs are only reaching 1% of the people who need help. Many people with low literacy skills are already working. If training is not available in the workplace, it must be readily accessible outside of working hours. Accessible services are key to reaching the 25% milestone.

No Sharing of Best Practices

There is no standardized tool kit or package of services available to deal with literacy problems for workers who lose their jobs through plant closures. HRDC does not have national standards for these situations.

Skill Requirements are a Moving Target

Many young people do not appreciate the skills they will need to sustain themselves as adults. Schools do not place sufficient emphasis on “career and life planning.” Even those who leave school with good basic skills must accept the need for lifelong learning.

Sustainable Funding

Amid growing concerns about literacy and basic skills, many schools are losing their libraries or closing altogether. The education system is under enormous strain, particularly in rural areas and in some regions, where adult learning programs are drying up. Governments are willing to finance pilot projects to help people move into the workforce but assume that someone else will keep them going over the long run. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) spend their time and effort chasing money instead of teaching people to read, write and communicate.

Areas for Action

Participants agreed that reducing the number of adults with low literacy skills by 25% will require enormous commitment from governments, employers and the education and training community. They put forward the following important first steps.

1. Federal and provincial governments must establish adult learning as a priority. There must be clear policies with respect to funding to ensure that literacy and basic skill development programs are accessible to all who need them. The questions of who is responsible and who pays must be as clear for adult learning as they are for K-12 education.
2. The provinces must reinforce the public education system to keep young people in school and ensure that all graduates have strong basic skills.
3. There must be a better understanding of the literacy challenge. We need to understand better what motivates individuals to upgrade their skills and how employers can be encouraged to invest in basic skills development.
4. Partnerships must be created to share best practices in adult learning and make services accessible to learners and employers in the most cost-effective way.

Increasing Apprenticeship Completion Rates

Milestone: *Over the next decade, the number of apprentices completing certification doubles to 37,000.*

Is the Milestone Right?

Participants were unanimous on the need to improve performance in the apprenticeship system. However, they were less sure that doubling the current completion rate was the right target. To some, data limitations and definition questions make quantifiable goals difficult. As one participant asked, “Are we talking about voluntary or mandatory certifications?” Given that skill shortages are not evenly distributed, others thought that sector and trade-specific milestones would make more sense. Nonetheless, participants did not see the milestone as unattainable. As one pointed out “...we are talking about less than one half of one percent of the labour force.” Many seemed to feel that the goal should be higher.

Key Points

Participants agreed that the shortage of skilled tradespeople stems from low enrolment and high attrition rates in apprenticeship programs. This is coupled with steeper retirement rates as older workers retire, and a growing economy which boosts demand for these skills. Participants were also of like mind on the root causes of low enrolment and completion levels in the apprenticeship system.

“Image” is the greatest deterrent to enrolment in apprenticeship programs. The trades have been unfairly tagged as “sunset jobs in sunset industries” with low pay and poor job security. In fact, the opposite is true. As was noted, “We do not value the work of skilled tradespeople even though we put our lives in their hands.” Parents and the school system reinforce a strong social and cultural bias against the trades and point young people toward other career paths. In one participant’s view, “High school guidance counselors are all university graduates.”

It was observed that “the culture of the trades workplace is not friendly to women.” This is a real deterrent to their enrolment and retention. Given that there are fewer and fewer physical barriers which preclude women from working in the trades, “can we afford to keep ignoring this potential labour pool?”

Enrolment in apprenticeship programs has doubled in the past decade, but the number of completions has remained flat. High attrition rates are due largely to economic factors. In a downturn, apprentices are often the first workers to get laid off; many do not resume their training when the economy picks up because they have found jobs elsewhere.

As older workers retire in growing numbers, there are fewer mentors for young apprentices. This inter-generational issue will pose a significant problem in construction and other industries that are dependent on skilled trades and on-the-job training.

Roles, Responsibilities and Action Steps

Promoting the Trades

The first step toward increased enrolment in trades training is to deal with the image problem by educating young people as well as parents, teachers and guidance counselors about the career opportunities in the skilled trades. The need is to “validate” apprenticeship as a form of post-secondary education. As one participant noted, “We have to make the trades a career of first choice that is not just for people who can’t cut it in university.”

Participants saw a role for all stakeholders in marketing the trades:

1. Employers and unions should get into the high schools for face-to-face meetings with students, teachers and guidance counselors to portray trades careers in an accurate light. Similarly, teachers and students should visit worksites to see first-hand what tradespeople do.
2. Provincial education authorities should actively support employer-union initiatives and validate trades education through scholarships and better integration of trades and academic study in high schools. Alberta was seen to be the leader in this respect and could offer models for other provinces. The government of Quebec is also taking innovative action to improve counseling and career information for youth to attract them to the skilled trades.
3. HRDC should partner with NGOs to market trades careers to young people and Canadians generally. Participants agreed that “this is a national problem that needs national attention.”

Finally, it was pointed out that current K-12 students will not reach the labour market for at least four or five more years. In marketing the trades, therefore, one suggestion was to target young people who are already working but might consider a career change.

Reducing Attrition

The key to reducing attrition is to limit the possibility of lay-offs that interrupt apprenticeship training. “We have to figure out how to keep apprentices on the job during a downturn.” Some suggested that, with skills shortages already emerging, apprentices are no longer “the first to go.” Another idea was to modify seniority provisions in some union contracts to allow apprentices to complete their training. One participant suggested that employment insurance funds might be used to carry apprentices through market downturns.

There was also a suggestion that a lack of employer commitment to apprenticeship training contributes to attrition. “Some employers are happy to have a piece of the trade, but don’t let their apprentices develop the full range of skills.” Increased supervision of apprenticeship training by provincial governments was seen as necessary to ensure that companies do what they are legally obliged to do.

Participants believed that HRDC should look into this issue more closely to determine how apprenticeship completion rates can be improved.

Capacity Issues

If efforts to market the trades are successful, participants believed that selective investment in training facilities will be required to deal with increased enrolment. They stressed, however, that since 85% of trades education takes place in a work setting, employers must re-commit to apprenticeship training. Participants also saw a need to expand prior learning assessment and recognition facilities to provide advance standing in trades programs for people who already have good foundation skills.

Retaining Older Workers

Governments and employers should study ways of retaining older workers, both to reduce shortages and to facilitate knowledge transfer to and mentoring of younger workers and apprentices. Some thought this might require changes to pension plans and legislation to ensure that older workers are not penalized by staying on the job.

Closing Plenary Discussion

The Minister of Human Resources Development Canada, The Honourable Jane Stewart, was present for much of the afternoon discussions and for the closing plenary session. In her remarks she emphasized the Government's view that skills and learning underpin our prosperity and quality of life, and are key to an inclusive society. She assured participants that the government is determined to engage Canadians on skills and learning issues and to address these challenges in concert with all of the players in the labour market.

Managing Complexity

The Minister stressed the difficulty in responding to these enormously complex issues, but noted that they can break down into more manageable pieces when learning is considered in life-cycle terms from early childhood development, through youth to adults and seniors. For each stage there are groups with expertise who can join in a national "conversation" about learning. HRDC is finding this life-cycle framework an effective organizing tool to tackle the skills and learning agenda.

Federal-Provincial Relations

The Minister emphasized that the Government of Canada is committed to moving forward on the skills and learning agenda. Recent successes in federal-provincial partnering in areas such as the Early Childhood Development Agreement and health care were cited by the Minister as demonstrating the ways and means to get beyond jurisdictional questions. She noted, "I have been impressed at the response of the provinces and territories to this discussion of skills and learning."

Milestones

The Minister acknowledged that there is a need for more clarity on the milestones that were being discussed. While underlining the value of establishing targets and goals, the Minister agreed it was critical to start with credible baseline information, to be clear on what is being measured and to monitor progress.

Moving Forward

The Roundtable concluded by considering the “next steps” in the *Knowledge Matters* consultation process. The Minister identified four filters or principles that would test the merit of any future initiatives:

1. ***Sustainability*** - There is no point in creating new programs that we cannot support fiscally. All new programs and all new partnerships must be undertaken in the context of sustainability, so that Canadians can know they will be there and plan accordingly.
2. ***Responsiveness*** - The systems must be nimble and able to respond quickly to new problems and changing circumstances. There is a need to avoid large, inflexible programs which are difficult to modify once in place.
3. ***Inclusiveness*** - Learning and skills development must extend to all people at all stages in the life-cycle whether they are in or outside of the workforce.
4. ***Partnership*** -: No one party owns these issues – everybody has a way of contributing, and building partnerships is key to success.

Minister Stewart concluded that the priority is to fully engage the country in the importance of learning. The workplace is the logical venue for successful approaches to adult learning and skills development.

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations from the National Roundtable on the Adult Labour Force

A: Learning Opportunities for Adult Canadians

Milestone: *Within five years, the number of adult learners increases by one million men and women throughout all segments of society.*

- The milestone is essentially sound, but there are many barriers to be overcome, including the costs of formal learning and the special needs of small and remote communities and “marginalized groups”.
- There is a strong demographic rationale for bringing “marginalized groups” into the workforce, but this will require new, specialized programs.
- Governments should “audit” their policies and programs to eliminate disincentives to learning.
- Access to community-based learning can drive regional and local development.
- Part of the challenge will be to identify factors which motivate learning and to “sell” Canadians on the value of learning.
- We need to rethink traditional learning models and reinforce incentives for workplace learning.

B. Encouraging Employers to Invest More in Skills Development

Milestone: *Within five years, businesses increase by one-third their annual investment in training per employee.*

- There were concerns that the milestone fails to account for informal training, that it is not sensitive to sectoral differences or stages in the business cycle, and that the five-year time frame is beyond the planning horizon of most Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).
- It was suggested that the milestone should relate to actual increases in worker competencies rather than dollars invested.
- Large firms are generally more aware of the “business case” for training while many small firms lack the resources needed to approach training strategically.
- There was agreement that public spending on training must increase but no consensus on whether governments should use a “carrot” or “stick” approach to increase employer investments in training.

- The federal government could provide a clearing house for information on best practices in training, and cultivate broad public understanding of the “business case” for training.
- HRDC should ensure that sector councils reach their full potential in facilitating employer-sponsored training and helping SMEs adopt strategic human resource management practices.
- There was discussion on how recognizing exemplary firms could motivate other firms to provide more training, including the possibility that a certificate recognizing training completed by individuals might help to improve labour mobility.

C. Meeting Adult Skills Development Needs

Milestone: *The number of adult Canadians with low literacy skills is reduced by 25% over the next decade.*

- The milestone is realistic, although it reflects the minimum achievement necessary.
- There is a need to clarify definitions of literacy and basic skills requirements so that Canadians will understand the problem better.
- Roles and responsibilities among governments, employers and education and training providers must be clarified and clear accountabilities established.
- SMEs have special concerns and needs in relation to workplace training.
- Schools must introduce young people to “career and life planning”.
- Remedial training must be more accessible; governments should address core funding requirements for NGOs that deliver training.
- Provinces must reinforce public education and ensure that all high school graduates have adequate basic skills.
- Partnerships must be created to share best practices in adult learning across Canada and make cost-effective services accessible to learners and employers.

D. Increasing Apprenticeship Completion Rates

Milestone: *Over the next decade, the number of apprentices completing a certification doubles to 37,000.*

- The milestone is achievable, although targets for specific sectors and trades could be considered.
- The trades have an “image problem”; the work of tradespeople is not valued.

- Enrolment in trades programs has doubled in a decade but the completion rate has dropped.
- As older workers retire, there are fewer mentors for apprentices, leading to a knowledge transfer problem.
- Employers and unions jointly should market trades careers to high school students, teachers, parents and guidance counselors.
- Provinces should follow the lead of Alberta and Quebec in promoting the trades.
- Unions and employers must work together, possibly using employment insurance funds, to protect apprenticeship training during periods of industry or economic slowdowns.
- Meeting the milestone will require increased employer commitments and public investments in training and prior learning assessment facilities.

Appendix A: List of Participants

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