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Future Skills Centre

Presented by
The Conference Board of Canada

Future Skills Centre Podcast

Episode 2: Addressing Inequalities in the Workforce

Driven by an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens, the Future Skills Centre recognizes the competitive advantage that comes from fostering innovative solutions which address the needs of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, including women, youth, newcomers, racialized minorities, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, and people from Indigenous, rural, remote, and northern communities.

Through authentic engagement with grassroots organizations and diverse communities across Canada, as well as the use of a strength-based and asset-focused perspective, knowledge and solutions are needed that shift the focus from just 'fixing' job seekers to eroding systemic barriers to change our institutions, helping us build a more inclusive and equitable labour market. In our second episode of Season One of the Future Skills Centre podcast, we speak to Maya Roy (YWCA), Ed Ng (Bucknell University), and Jordan Wapass (The Conference Board of Canada) to take on some of these issues.

Timestamps

03:20–09:18 Eddy Ng
10:18–16:49 Maya Roy
17:55–23:40 Jordan Wapass

Links

Future Skills Centre and Conference Board of Canada links, such as recommended articles and webpages, social media handles, etc.

Future Skills Centre Homepage:
https://fsc-ccf.ca/

Future Skills Centre Twitter:
https://twitter.com/fsc_ccf_en

The Conference Board of Canada Homepage:
https://www.conferenceboard.ca/

The Conference Board of Canada Twitter:
https://twitter.com/ConfBoardofCda

The Conference Board of Canada Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/ConferenceBoardofCanada/

All on Board (Women on Boards Online Experience Co-Authored by Maria Giammarco):
https://www.conferenceboard.ca/research/all-on-board

Employment Gaps and Underemployment for Racialized Groups (Paper Co-Authored by Eddy Ng):
https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/employment-gaps-and-underemployment-for-racialized-groups-and-immigrants-in-canada/

Addressing the Causes of Indigenous Vulnerability to Pandemics – not Just the Symptoms (Blog Post Co-Authored by Jordan Wapass):
https://www.conferenceboard.ca/insights/blogs/addressing-the-causes-of-indigenous-vulnerability-to-pandemics-not-just-the-symptoms

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Transcript

Heather McIntosh:
Hi listeners, before we begin, we just want to acknowledge that this episode was recorded prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada. As you well know, this virus has had a dramatic effect on Canadians' ability to go to work and access training and education among so many other things. The conversations and opinions you will be hearing do not address COVID-related challenges specifically but are meant to provide instructive insights into how we can better prepare for the future of work more broadly. We hope you enjoy this episode.

Welcome to the Future Skills Centre Podcast presented by the Conference Board of Canada. I'm your host, Heather McIntosh. As a member of the education and skills team at the Conference Board of Canada, my colleagues and I are constantly looking ahead, gaining and sharing insights into the labour market of today and the future. Together with our partners, we inform and support local approaches to skills development and employment training to help Canadians transition in the changing economy. The Future Skills Centre is a consortium made up of the Conference Board of Canada, Blueprint, and Ryerson University. Together, we're building a centre that strives for research excellence and evidence generation.

Like countries across the globe, Canada is facing wide-reaching demographic and technological changes that pose increasingly significant challenges to the world of work. In season one of the Future Skills Centre Podcast presented by the Conference Board of Canada, we will explore some of the most crucial emerging challenges to the future of work. Each episode will unpack a unique challenge facing Canadians.

Inequalities in the Canadian workforce have persisted over time. The pay gaps and glass ceilings faced by vulnerable groups like women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and newcomers, for example, have been an unjust part of Canadian society for far too long. Although equity initiatives have been increasingly adopted over the last few decades, it is clear that more needs to be done. More needs to change, from both the policy perspective and within the workplace. In this episode, we'll be speaking about equity laws in Canada, the lived experiences of women, newcomers, and indigenous peoples, and about research that is being done to help understand and eliminate systemic barriers faced by vulnerable groups entering the labour force.

I'll speak with educators, researchers, and practitioners with different perspectives on diversity and inclusion, and dig into questions like, how can we incentivize employers to adopt equitable workplace environments? How are vulnerable groups disadvantaged in the Canadian economy? And what does it mean for an organization to be trauma informed?

Ed Ng is a James and Elizabeth Freeman Professor of Management at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Ed specializes in employment equity policies, and I got to talking with him about legislative approaches to diversifying the workforce, the difference between diversity inclusion, as well as the types of initiatives workplaces can embrace to move the dial on equity. He started off by explaining employment equity in the Canadian context to me.

Ed Ng:
So employment equity is a piece of legislation that was originally designed to redress historical discrimination and to restore imbalances in the workforce. Now, as far as the Act is concerned, it only really covers federally regulated industries. So in this case, banking and financial services, communications and transportation, as well as public sector employers. So for instance, if you're a government agency, (UNKNOWN), RCMP as well as Canadian Forces, and of course at the Public Service Commission.

Now, if you look at employment equity, the scope of coverage is very small. Effectively, it covers less than 4% of the workforce. So the legislation itself is outdated. The four groups that were originally identified as designated groups will be women, visible minorities, aboriginals as well as persons with disabilities. But we know that even the terminologies have changed. Visible minorities have been deemed to be offensive and racist. We no longer refer to aboriginals as aboriginals. We call them Indigenous Canadians because that's the perfect term.

So for most part, the act itself needs to be revamped, modernized, and updated. If we look at other jurisdictions, for instance, in the UK, they have actually unified their Equality Act, same thing in Australia, it's expanded to cover pay gap as well as maternity leave. So as a piece of standalone legislation, it hasn't been as effective because it's not keeping up with times.

Heather McIntosh:
So Ed, in your opinion, what is the best way to get employers to enact employment equity?

Ed Ng:
So despite the fact that employment equity is dated, my own research has shown that without employment equity employers actually don't take the initiative to diversify the work force. And even if they do, they're pretty weak. So employment equity is still really important in order to get organizations to mirror the diversity that's reflected in the Canadian workforce. From that perspective, it brings critical mass of women in senior management. It brings a critical mass for visible minorities or racialized Canadians into the workplace. You need that critical mass in order to change climate within the organization. And I think that's key. So when you talk about the everyday lived experiences, that has to stop with legislation or public policy itself.

So that is why legislation still remains to be the most effective way to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace. We've got all this implicit bias training, the moral imperatives, why we have to do the right thing, but those things don't really go beyond the rhetoric.

Heather McIntosh:
There's a lot of concern in Canada about skills gaps and labour shortages on the horizon. How can a diverse and inclusive workforce help us tackle these looming challenges?

Ed Ng:
That's a really good question. Diversity had been a source of strength and that has been the tagline that the Canadian government had used. And we have seen that deployed quite effectively in the workplace. So when you bring in a lot of immigrants to Canada to plug the ageing workforce, what'd you end up having is a highly educated and highly skilled workforce. We see through a lot of examples in the US and we're also seeing it right now, a lot of the immigrants that come to Canada tend to do one of two things. They tend to be highly educated and skilled, and that's where they actually can bolster Canada's participation in the knowledge work.

So when you look at IT or biotechnology, this is where they actually make significant contributions. The other end of it is those who are not able to join your work force and are creating entrepreneurship.

And a lot of it would start off with ethnic entrepreneurship. And that has been an emerging sector of the economy as organizations start changing, as the economy… There's a structural shift in the economy. So you start to see that immigrants actually add a lot of value from that perspective. The other thing of course is if you look at the landscape of the workforce and how we run our businesses, oftentimes with globalization, a lot of employers actually have to be operating around the clock. So by having a diverse workforce that speak multiple languages, we can now actually partner up with other organizations that's based in other parts of the world.

Heather McIntosh:
I love it. I love it. Ed, is there any last things you wanted to add?

Ed Ng:
You raised a point about inclusion and I think it's important for us to raise an awareness. So diversity is just numbers. That's easy, you can hire for diversity, right? But what's really important is creating a climate of inclusion, whereby everybody could thrive. Now this is more difficult than what people say or think. For most part, organizations, policies, and practices were put in place and had discrimination or implicit bias training. But what people truly want is a sense of community, and this goes beyond inclusion. So this is where I met my college tutor, Neil Boyd, who actually (UNKNOWN) a community model.

And I think it's great because what it really means is that community is about membership, so you're a part of a community, it could be in a workplace or it could be where you live, and then you're able to have influence, you can influence each other and having a voice that's respected and you're heard. The third part is needs to fulfillment, right?

So from this perspective, what do you get out of being part of the community, part of the organization? So people join communities for different reasons. So in this case, it's not just employment, but also a sense of recognition, being respected. And the last part that I like the most would be about emotional connection. You feel emotionally connected with each other. Until you have community, you don't really have a truly inclusive workplace that everybody could thrive. So to me, that's really important.

Heather McIntosh:
Ed pointed out in our conversation that the Employment Equity Act hasn't been updated in 25 years, and it shows its age in some glaring ways. For instance, the language it uses to reference two of its designated groups, visible minorities and indigenous people is now discriminatory and out of touch. However, Ed's research shows that employment equity also remains the primary driver of diversification in the workforce, and that employers do not take adequate initiatives towards inclusion without it.

One organization leading the movement to remove these barriers and support the development of an equitable workforce is the YWCA. I was lucky enough to snag a conversation with Maya Roy, CEO of YWCA Canada about the structural disadvantages faced by women, especially racialized women, when it comes to finding meaningful, skills appropriate work in Canada. In our chat, we dove right in. I began by asking her about the ways in which vulnerable groups are disadvantaged in the Canadian economy.

Maya Roy:
I think there's a number of ways we know, for example, from a policy perspective around the gender wage gap. We also know if we do a deeper dive into the gender wage gap, sadly, even pay inequities are not created equal. So an indigenous woman who's university educated makes less than a white Canadian-born university educated woman. We know, for example, that newcomer women on average tend to have more education than Canadian-born women, but also

have higher rates of unemployment. So that disconnect, we know women living with disabilities are at higher risk of being sexually assaulted and harassed on the job, but also have higher rates of unemployment.

I think one of the biggest problems as someone who has done work on the ground on this issue, and not just from a policy perspective that really bugged me, is that sort of lean-in mentality. Like "you can do it!" kind of thing. And for a lot of vulnerable groups, that's just simply not an option. Employers don't know what to do with you, they don't know how to provide a workplace that is necessarily inclusive or safe. We also tend to find, for example, bigger companies might have policies in place, but for a lot of the women that I was working with in my career, newcomer women, for example, tend to get jobs in smaller to medium-sized businesses.

And that's where a lot of the labour violations happen. So even for example, if the laws are in place, for example, around minimum wage, that doesn't necessarily mean the laws are being enforced. And at the end of the day, it's about that power difference, that power dynamic. If you're a newcomer woman and for example, because of how immigration regulations are structured, you've been sponsored by your partner and say it's an abusive relationship. You can't afford to leave.

If you need to make money to pay your bills and you're working for example, a job where your employer is mistreating you, or for example has labelled you as a contractor so he can get out of paying necessary deductions to the government. Really what choice do you have? Are you really going to call labour standards and start an investigation? Are you really going to bring in a lawyer and sue someone? I mean, that just simply isn't available to you. I've also, for example worked with really enterprising, smart newcomer women. For example, another thing that we hear often is, "Oh, become an entrepreneur. Just go and start your own business".

Well, we know for example, in Silicon Valley that most businesses fail within the first three years or for a newcomer woman, where are you going to go and get access to capital? Where's your angel investor? That doesn't exist, right? So the woman is actually starting the business on her credit card or she's selling some of her belongings. It's simply all that much more complicated. So a lot of the small liberal ways of talking about labour market access, when we start to really do a deeper dive, simply don't make an impact or unfortunately, sometimes even further marginalize community members.

So for example, it's great if people want to start their own side hustle, but what does that really mean when we don't have well-paying full time jobs with benefits out there? So at a certain point, I think for us as people who are involved in this kind of conversation, it's about having really clear conversations with government, with private sectors, with organizations such as the YWCA actually bringing these experiences to the forefront. Because one of the things I'm worried about personally, I don't necessarily see things getting better in the next 10 to 15 years because as jobs get automated, and if we don't have clear policies in place like a guaranteed minimum income, if we haven't thought about the future of work, it's not realistic to expect entire swaths of the population to simply retrain as coders or computer programmers.

So we're going to need to have some clear plans in place around how to provide meaningful access, and what do the new jobs of the future actually look like? Otherwise, I think we're going to have a really clear social breakdown.

Heather McIntosh:
How can we tackle obstacles that impede women from succeeding, particularly marginalized women from succeeding in the future?

Maya Roy:
I think my elevator pitch would be at the end of the day, it's the big picture solutions that count. For example, if we were to spend 1% of our GDP on creating universal accessible childcare,

labour market participation would go right up. If we address parity, for example, in terms of the wage gap, that would increase our GDP by 150 billion by 2026. And that's not Maya Roy or YWCA, a bunch of lefty feminists, even though we're not, we're actually nonpartisan organization. That's actually in The McKinsey report talking about that.

So ironically, for example, I've seen bigger support for universal accessible childcare come from the private sector than government at times. So one or two really big picture shifts like that could actually really increase our economic productivity.

Heather McIntosh:
Maya, as a feminist, as a woman working to support and advocate for vulnerable populations, and as the CEO of the YWCA, what drives you to do your job?

Maya Roy:
I have a lot of lived experience. I know what it's like to work precarious jobs. I know what it's like to not have access to public transit and to take the bus, trying to figure out a way to get to work. I think at the end of the day, having experienced gender violence, having experienced precarious jobs, that's what forces me to move forward. And the YWCA actually gives me a platform to talk about that work, bringing community experiences and actually bringing that to high-level policy makers around changes that are needed in society.

Heather McIntosh:
In my conversation with Maya, we unpacked a lot of concepts and perspectives surrounding inequalities in the labour market for women. She touched on some interesting topics and highlighted some of the unique issues and barriers faced by women whose identities intersect with other vulnerable groups. While equity policies are essential, it's also important to recognize the great work being done by organizations like the WCA in leading the movement towards a more equitable Canada. By amplifying the voices of those who are not often heard, we can begin to better understand their issues and address them in meaningful ways. A podcast episode on increasing labour market access to vulnerable groups in Canada would be incomplete without addressing the roles of indigenous peoples in the future of work. Jordan Wapass is Cree and a member of the Thunderchild First Nation in Saskatchewan. We spoke about a research project he's leading for the Future Skill Centre on indigenizing corporate Canada. He has been focusing on labour market access from a different lens, the workplace itself. Jordan started off by telling me about the project.

Jordan Wapass:
The project I'm working on is really focused on indigenizing corporate Canada. And as a sub of that, I'm looking specifically at the under representation of indigenous people, professionals rather, in finance and management. So where this research journey has taken me has allowed me to, permitted me rather, to interview indigenous professionals from across the country. And what we're focusing on is sort of like, why do they think that under-representation exists? If there were more indigenous professionals in the space, what would that mean for the Canadian economy and the future opportunities? And then when we get to a point where we have more indigenous professionals in the field, what are the retention and recruitment strategies that indigenous and non-indigenous organizations can use to retain and keep their talent?

So one of the questions that we've asked quite simply is what can finance and management firms do to improve their retention of indigenous professionals? And what we found, there's some pretty obvious things like pay. We want to make sure that you pay indigenous professionals what they're worth and what their designations would permit them to be paid.

Some of the other things that I found that have been quite interesting is the idea that organizations need to repair their workforce and provide and educate them on the history of say, residential schools and some of the trauma that indigenous people have incurred here in this country. Because a lot of the time you'll hear

"Well, why don't they just get over it? You know, why do they put up with these... Why are they putting up these blockades. Why is there so much resistance? Why don't they just get over it?" And I think that's very dangerous to have that pervasive narrative out there in Canada. So workplaces have a responsibility, I feel, to provide that education, to be trauma-informed and they need to ensure that they're educating their people on that.

Heather McIntosh:
So, what does it mean for an organization to be trauma-informed?

Jordan Wapass:
That's a really good question. I think it has to do with being aware of the impacts of intergenerational trauma. And we've learned over time, the federal government has created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to speak about the legacy and the impacts of residential schools and the trauma that has been imposed on indigenous people and the resulting intergenerational effects. So I think organizations that can explain that to a regular Canadian or someone that's new to the workforce, or even someone that's been there a while, just so that they have some more context and understanding and empathy about why things are the way they are.

Heather McIntosh:
How does the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the workforce contribute to the wellbeing of Canada?

Jordan Wapass:
So I think first and foremost, it's an untapped labour resource that is available and ready. And I think when indigenous communities have the ability to create economic development, to create economy, to generate sustainability, to have the ability to invest in community and social development and things like that, I think Canada benefits. And to me, it's quite obvious because you're not creating and reciprocating this welfare state and this state of dependence.

Heather McIntosh:
Jordan, looking to the future, what can be done to ensure that indigenous people succeed in the Canadian labour market?

Jordan Wapass:
I think that organizations, businesses will do themselves a great favour by incorporating indigenous people into management and decision-making roles. I did an interview with someone and what they said was, and it really stuck with me, is that when there's these joint ventures or these partnerships, you have these new opportunities that are created. But what ends up getting created is this employment ghetto where indigenous people are occupying the lower portions of the ladder. Or the other thing is indigenous people are typecast or pigeonholed into these liaison roles. And I think having this indigenous epistemology worldviews embedded into the senior structure and the decision making of organizations, I think that's really going to bode well for relationships and for attracting and retaining more talent.

Heather McIntosh:
Jordan, do you have any final thoughts that you want to share on how education, government, private sector can work together to best increase workplace equity for indigenous peoples?

Jordan Wapass:
I think one of the things that's just been resounding through my research and interviews is the idea that we need more mentorship. We need more internships. We need more co-op placements to help integrate indigenous youth and indigenous people into these somewhat foreign spaces. We're finding that indigenous people are extremely underrepresented in the finance and management profession. It's not a hard stat because this data isn't captured or collected yet, but there's around 211,000 CPAs in Canada, that's Chartered Professional Accountants and maybe there's 200 who self-identify as indigenous. That's an alarmingly low stat. So businesses, corporate Canada, the federal government have those, create those

bridging opportunities to encourage youth to pursue this path, I think will be just a tremendously valuable thing to do.

Heather McIntosh:
Diverse and inclusive workplaces are not only critical to ensuring great organizational performance. By empowering vulnerable populations to find meaningful work, we can help respond to looming labour and skill shortages in Canada, drive the country's competitiveness and create an inclusive society for all. We hope that employers and policymakers alike will listen to these stories and consider adopting some of the approaches we heard about in this episode to create a competitive and inclusive environment. The Diversity Institute based out of Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management is a partner in the Future Skills Centre and is working on just this. With deep expertise in disruptive technologies, adoption strategies, and innovation processes, it is also focused on new approaches to understanding future skills and meeting employer needs by leveraging diversity and inclusion.

Through Skills Next, the Public Policy Forum, the Diversity Institute, and the Future Skills Centre are publishing a series of short review papers on the state of the skills and education ecosystem in Canada. These papers will present the current knowledge on important issues and identify under-researched opportunities for policy makers to explore. To learn more about the series and the Diversity Institute go to ryerson.ca/diversity.

Our episodes so far have focused on some issues and barriers surrounding the Canadian workforce in general. But what did these issues look like within specific industries? To address this question, the next episode of the Future Skills Centre podcast will be focused on the skills needed by apprentices and skilled trade workers, namely digital, green and human skills.

Given topics that we've spoken about so far, like the need for social emotional skills and the unequal access to work faced by certain vulnerable groups. It's worth taking a deep dive into understanding how the technological, demographic and policy changes in the future will affect how our food will be made, how our buildings will be constructed and how our vehicles will be driven in the world of tomorrow.

Until then, if you're enjoying the podcast, why not share it with a friend or colleague who would enjoy it too? You can subscribe through your favourite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And let's keep working toward a better future for all Canadians.

The Future Skills Centre podcast is presented by the Conference Board of Canada and hosted by me, Heather McIntosh. It is produced by Noah Snyderman and Kevin O'Meara. At the Conference Board of Canada, we master complexity through our trusted research and unparalleled connections, delivering unique insight into Canada's toughest problems, so leaders and communities can build a stronger future. Learn more about us and our work at conferenceboard.ca. We are a proud consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, which is a Pan-Canadian initiative, connecting ideas and innovations generated across Canada, so that employees and employers can succeed in the labour market. And to ensure that local regional and national economies thrive. To learn more, visit fsc-ccf.ca.

Funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program

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