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Presented by

The Conference Board of Canada

The Future Skills Podcast

Season 4: Episode 4

Empowering futures: Supporting Black talent in the Canadian labour market

The Black population in Canada is expected to exceed 3 million by 2041. Despite growing awareness of the root causes of inequities faced by Black communities, we don't yet have interventions at scale in the skills ecosystem. In this episode, our guests describe the importance of culturally relevant, targeted programing for supporting Black communities in Canada to thrive in education and employment.

Our guests envision a future where gaps in educational attainment and wages between Black and non-Black individuals are closed, and where anti-Black racism in our classrooms and workplaces is eradicated. They share successful components of workforce development programs, including social capital development, mentorship, socioemotional development, and community involvement.

Guests

Kofi Hope, CEO and Co-Founder, Monumental

André McDonald, Professor, Mechanical Engineering, Associate Vice-President, Strategic Research Initiatives and Performance, University of Alberta

Mohamed Elmi, Executive Director, Diversity Institute

Host

Heather McIntosh, Director, Education and Skills, The Conference Board of Canada

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

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Transcript

Heather McIntosh:
Welcome to Season 4 of the Future Skills Podcast, presented by the Conference Board of Canada on behalf of the Future Skills Centre. Here we explore how skills development can prepare Canadians for the future of work. I'm Heather McIntosh, your host for the season. I'm the Director of the Education and Skills Team at the Conference Board of Canada.

The Black population in Canada is expected to exceed 3 million by 2041. Despite growing awareness of the root causes of inequities faced by Black communities, we don't yet have interventions at scale in the skills ecosystem. In this episode, our guests envision a future where gaps in educational attainment and wages between Black and non-Black individuals are closed, and where anti-Black racism in our classrooms and workplaces is eradicated.

They share their analysis and reflections on what we know about how to best support Black communities in Canada to thrive in education and employment. First up, I'm speaking with Kofi Hope. Kofi is a co-founder of Monumental, a consulting firm that helps its clients to advance equity and social impact within their organizations. Kofi is also an urbanist in residence at the University of Toronto and a writer. Welcome, Kofi. Glad you could be a part of the podcast today.

Kofi Hope:
Thanks for having me.

Heather:
Kofi, let's chat first about the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals. I understand this is a Toronto-based charity that provides culturally-specific workforce development, and support to help Black youth move from crisis to stability. I know that after finishing school, you were recruited to develop this program and spent years leading it. Can you tell me why the focus on Black youth in this program is so important?

Kofi:
Yes. That's pretty simple. The stats in this country are quite sobering when you look at the condition of folks of African descent. In the city of Toronto in particular, at least from the 2016 census, I'm not as familiar with the 2020 results. In 2016, it was 48% of Black youth in Toronto lived in low-income households. 50% of all the students that were expelled from the Toronto District School Board were Black youth. Black youth had the highest rate of unemployment of any demographic in the city. 42% of the young people taken from their homes and put into care of the Children's Aid Society were Black youth.

I could list off other indicators when we're talking about social determinants of health or working poverty, housing insecurity, food insecurity. Across the board, the statistics are quite clear that Black Canadian communities, not just in Toronto, but nationally have some of the biggest disparities when it comes to those key indicators that lead to a healthy and thriving life. Black communities for a generation were pressing to say, "Hey, Canada likes to talk about visible minorities and group all communities together.

We're not against having solidarity with other communities, but actually, we're losing the fact that anti-Black racism is a distinct phenomenon, how it manifests for Black communities, and the barriers Black people face in this country are different than any other community. We need targeted support so that we can fully participate in Canadian life like every other community." As the moves over the '90s into the 2000s took place to get that data, the data proved what the activists have been saying for decades to be true.

That Black communities face distinct barriers in Canada, and there's a whole history around that we could talk about on how we got to that place, but that is the reality we have. We also know now we have the data that when we do targeted and focused programs that work with Black youth and Black communities, we can see tremendous results. Those are the reasons that it's so important to have distinct programs for Black communities.

Heather:
After working in this workforce development world for several years, do you have any reflections from your time?

Kofi:
Yes, I think the system is quite broken, to be honest. The current workforce development system feels like a conveyor belt. We jump on, we get dropped off at an employer. We're in a dead-end job or a job that doesn't have great work conditions, or there's systemic barriers or other pieces. We do that for a little while. If the employer keeps us after the subsidy comes in, we feel like we're stuck and we're not actually moving forward, and it doesn't feel like a human system. It doesn't feel like a system that is empowering us.

CEE and many other organizations out there have been saying, how do we innovate within the workforce development state? How do we find a system that isn't just a conveyor belt of taking folks who are underemployed and dropping them off at jobs that may not even be a good fit for them and certainly don't feel like a career pathway? How do we holistically build up people to enter the labor market, succeed in the labor market, and move forward in a career, not just a survival job?

That takes a different model. That's a more expensive model. That's a more time-intensive model. I think at CEE, we were really, and we had the indicators prove that if you really invest in those folks, especially those who are furthest from the labor market. You think about them as whole persons and all the parts of their life that are leading to them to be underemployed, that are preventing them from keeping a job, then you can actually have sustainable solutions. Many times we don't see that.

The other thing I'd say about workforce development is it's really complicated. You can have the best agencies in the world, but if the labor market shifts and the job market is not great, it doesn't matter how well you've trained those young people. They're just not going to find lots of opportunities out there. We constantly hear, "We need more people in the trades. We need more people in the trades," but you can train them, but that's not enough.

You have to line up, making sure people are getting trained in the right trades at the right time that they're needed in the labor market, in the right locations where that trade is in demand. Then you also have to deal with the fact that in unionized environment, it's seniority. These young people you're bringing in are at the bottom of the list. Even if there is need, it doesn't guarantee that they're getting to work right away and that the building trades, at least which I'm most familiar with, which are connected to construction are very cyclical.

Right now, we're in a cycle where interest rates and construction costs mean a lot of sites have gone, shovels down because of costs. I'm sure I can guarantee that there are, hundreds, if not thousands of young people who've just gone through workforce development programs. Gotten into the skilled trades and now they're entering at probably the worst time in 30 years to enter the market. That's nobody's fault that that's happened because there's so many variables when you think about connecting people who are underemployed to work, that it just makes it really difficult.

You have to think about a whole systems approach, not simply one intervention to get it right. I think all of these things mean workforce development is tough. I think there's as many failures as there are successes. I don't feel in this country or maybe anywhere in the world, we've truly cracked the code on how to do it right. That doesn't mean we shouldn't do it or we shouldn't be investing. I'm all for being honest about the systems we have, and the fact we definitely need to continue pushing the envelope around innovation and collaboration to get this thing right.

Heather:
Next, I'd like to hear about the FutureBUILDS program you led through Monumental with some funding from the Future Skills Centre. This program addressed the need for more diversity in the real estate industry. It supported racialized individuals, primarily Black, but including other racialized groups who had access to capital to enter real estate development, focusing on middle-scale projects of 5 to 8 units. I understand there was a huge interest in the program. Kofi, what does this tell us about the diversity within Black communities in Canada and the need for a spectrum of supports?

Kofi:
There are folks who are living lives of precarity, who have faced trauma, who faced systemic barriers, who have very limited engagement with the labor market. There's folks who are extremely successful and self-made. Despite anti-Black racism, the Black community in Canada still has a higher rate of post-secondary education than the general population. It's got many folks who've been successful in a variety of professions from law to medicine, to the legal field to business, et cetera. It is a diverse community.

There's disproportionately folks who are lower income, but there's folks across the spectrum. Despite that, even folks who are some of the most successful, most educated will talk about facing barriers of anti-Black racism, having to work twice as hard, having more issues getting access to lending, having more issues moving up the corporate ladder. Still facing issues, whether it's racial profiling or issues with your kids in the school system, et cetera. It's a diverse community.

Unfortunately, in this country, anti-Black racism, no one is immune to it. Because of historical barriers, one thing that this community, as many newcomer communities, as many folks are in the Black community face in Canada. Generational wealth and generational access to land is not something that's as prevalent. Being able to have community wealth, access to land, these things are really what brings power and social mobility in Canada.

Other communities have had access, whether they've been in the country longer, or whether they were able to benefit from more inequitable systems, have been able to build that community wealth and able to reinvest in their own communities and create economic opportunities for members of their communities. A program like FutureBUILDS is about that side of the equation. It's not about folks who are on Ontario Works or on Precarious Housing.

It's about folks who will help to do wealth creation in the community, who will be looking to support other Black families to gain access to home ownership. Who will be employing folks, who may be running the company where those Black youth who are in a trades program will actually be able to find long-term employment and support. Because so many of those industries, building trades, one that I've worked in, there's some pretty intense anti-Black racism that our graduates would face on the job site, that they would face within employment.

Many people would talk about, well, the places where they would get that respect or opportunities when they work for a Black contractor or Black-owned business. I think when we're thinking about community economic development and how we move communities forward, I would fully support that we should put a disproportionate amount of time and money to support those who are the most barriered.

I think we can't ignore the full spectrum of folks, including entrepreneurs, including business owners, including even skilled professionals who find themselves underemployed, not putting their skills into play. I think you have to do a holistic, whole community approach if you're thinking about moving forward the economic status of a group that's faced historic barriers.

Heather:
Kofi, I'd love to know what you think is your secret sauce, what you think really has helped drive the success of the organizations, the initiatives that you've shared today.

Kofi:
Yes, I think two pieces. One is this frame of social capital, of always thinking about bridging and bonding. If we're working specifically with Black communities, the importance for Black young people and folks in the Black community to be part of organizations that are focused on Black folks, that are Black-led, that are Black-run, that have that cultural competency built in, that is critical. Then also the bridging, making sure. Especially for young people who come from more marginalized neighborhoods or communities getting them exposure to other communities.

To other experiences, to other parts of our Canadian multicultural tapestry, getting them plugged in and building networks there. Always thinking about that has been key. I'll just double down on that piece of being culturally competent or culturally relevant. One thing the young people kept saying about CEE, the CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals, is it feels like we live in a city where nothing is for us.

This is one place that is unapologetically for us, that sees us who we are, doesn't ask us to explain ourselves, and is invested in our success.

Not only that, it's a place where we get to meet role models within our own community. I think this is one of the most insidious ways that anti-Black racism manifests. It can create a poverty in aspirations for young people. When you live in a country where you don't see folks that look like you, when you don't see folks from your neighborhood in certain professions, achieving in certain ways, it makes you feel that it's just not possible for me. It really limits your dreams.

When you talk to Black folks who have immigrated to Canada, who came from the Caribbean or the African continent, they'll talk about-- my own mom used to talk about that --what it meant growing up in a country where the prime minister was Black, your doctor was Black, your lawyer was Black, your postmaster was Black, your police officer was Black. There weren't those limits imposed that you felt come from the color of your skin. Whereas young people who were born here or move here talk all the time about Canada not presenting as a place historically where Black folks are welcome in every space where they can achieve in every space.

We have data from that. We have really strong data, which has shown the key to social mobility for Black communities is young people having access to role models from their community. That is the biggest driver in social mobility. The importance of having services for Black communities that are Black-led, that understand the culture, the dress, the lifestyle of Black people is so important if we're able to move past the systemic barriers we see. I've seen the exact same thing in some of my work with Indigenous communities.

The importance of Indigenous organizations that connect youth to their culture, that connect them to their historical languages, to their Indigenous spirituality. For anyone, we have to feel proud of who we are and where we've

come from and feel that we can achieve things in the world before we can go out and succeed in the world. One of the results of racism, of colonialism, of these histories, these lies, these narratives that have been told that limit what people can do, where they can achieve, what they're able to do.

Part of our secret sauce at the heart of it was smashing those narratives, smashing those limits, and letting people know you are a full part of this country. You are a taxpayer here. Anywhere in Canada, you should feel that you're able to go and able to achieve anything that any other Canadian does. You should feel that you can do as well. There can't be limits imposed on yourself because of where you're from.

Actually, when you understand where you're from and your history and culture, you should know that people of African descent have been achieving despite the odds for 400 years in the new world and for that for thousands of years before. You should feel that pride and that confidence when you step into the world. When you give a young person that, that is the secret sauce, I think, to them being able to succeed, to them be able to navigate the job market, to them be able to achieve success for themselves and their family.

Heather:
Kofi, it's been a pleasure to speak with you today. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

Kofi:
Thank you. It's been great to chat with you, Heather.

Heather:
Next, I'm speaking with Dr. André MacDonald, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, as well as the school's Associate Vice President, Strategic Research Initiatives and Performance. Welcome, André. Thanks for joining us on the podcast.

André MacDonald:
Thank you so much, Heather, for having me. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

Heather:
André, I know you are passionate about your academic work. It sounds fascinating. Through this work, you help solve difficult engineering problems in the area of heat transfer, hard surface coatings, and service modification. I also know you lead a lot of other work at the University of Alberta as well. Can you tell me a little bit about the program you started, the ELITE Program for Black Youth?

For our listeners, ELITE here stands for Experiential Learning in Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship. I understand this program has some funding from the Future Skills Centre. Can you tell me a bit about it? What was the motivation for developing it? What impact do you want it to have?

André:
I'd like to tell you a background story before I even tell you about the ELITE Program. One day I was walking, it was the middle of winter, and I was walking in the pedways at the University of Alberta, where I'm now currently a professor. I thought to myself, "Wow, André, you've accomplished a lot over these last, 13, 14 years since you've been a professor. You've focused a lot on your research, your career, your tenure track opportunity. What have you done for the Black community outside of the work that you've done?"

I really thought about that just as I walked home to take the train. As I thought more about it, I said, "Well, what can you do within the scope of what you're good at right now?" Build on your existing capacity. I know that I feel very passionate about work-integrated training. I feel very passionate about knowledge mobilization, knowledge translation. I also am very passionate about young people getting jobs. As a result of that, the ELITE Program for Black Youth was formulated in my mind.

The purpose of this program is really to provide paid work-integrated training to Black youth between the ages of 15 to 22, but doing it within the area of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine. Really looking at positioning young people with an opportunity to get hands-on skills in a work environment that would be positioned towards getting them jobs in the future, maybe even before they graduate. In addition to that, I spoke with a few of my colleagues, and we all agreed that a program like this would be unique if it had wraparound activities built into it.

When you look at Black youth or just Black Canadians generally, we can always go to school and get an education in STEM. We can get a job in STEM. There are some systemic barriers that we'll always have to face as professionals. How do we create a mindset where Black professionals in STEM will have additional training that are more on the socio-emotional side of things to help them not only to cope with some of these barriers, but also to overcome them? What we did is we integrated an entrepreneurship design series into the program as well.

The purpose of that is really to create an entrepreneurial mindset in young Black youth well before they have started the professions. Now we're setting the stage for them to think beyond just the world of work, but to think about creating opportunities for themselves. Should barriers in work restrict them from actually working fully in the labor force? Then we said, well, that's great, but then they're going to come up against some issues about how to balance some of these barriers, how to manage them, how to support an equilibrium between work and their personal lives.

When all these barriers come into play, how do you retain hope? How do you develop resilience? What we also did was to build in a wellness and coaching series into the program. What we're really looking at is taking a proactive, preemptive set of steps to prepare young people, not only for working in the substantive areas and the disciplines that they're going to pursue. To also give them some socio-emotional skills as well to be able to ensure that they are advocates for themselves, they can identify advocates or mentors, and then they will have a built-in resilience.

In terms of impact, what we're really looking at is to create young people that will be fully gainfully employed in high-wage technology areas or business areas as well. Who come fully equipped with some very targeted and specific socio-emotional skills to weather any challenges or difficulties that they may face as they work through their professional jobs. Of course, build their careers with a view towards socio-economic upward mobility.

Heather:
Kudos to you, André. This sounds like a fascinating program. How does it fit into the wider approaches to supporting students at the University of Alberta?

André:
The University of Alberta, through both its provostial office as well as its Office of Vice President Research and Innovation, under the vision of the president here at the university, have actually created opportunities where work-integrated training and experiential learning are built into the research ecosystem here at the university through our training programs. To that effect, we have created as an institution a student experience action plan that really captures programs like the ELITES program for Black youth.

The idea is that we're looking at pathways for this experiential training, this work-integrated training, but with support from the community as well. That community includes industry, companies that engage with us and hire our students through cooperative education programs or internship programs, of which the ELITES program is one of them. Also looking at where it makes sense to do so, to also engage students in our research at the same time, if that's what they're interested in.

Not all students necessarily want to work in industry after they complete their degrees. They may want to go to graduate school and pursue a research program. We're giving them that opportunity. The other thing that I should probably highlight as well is we, as an institution, especially through the provost office here at the University of Alberta, have given funding to support a program known as the Black Youth for Social Innovation Program.

That program is similar to the ELITE program, except it focuses on identifying interns and students who are interested in working in the social sciences and humanities and providing a similar work-integrated training opportunity for them. Really looking at work-integrated training around things like policy, perhaps the law, and other work around social structures and working with civil society organizations as well.

Heather:
Zooming out, I'd be interested to get your perspectives more generally on supporting the inclusion of Black communities within education and employment in Canada.

André:
My research and my own reading has shown that, especially in the United States and in some respects in Canada as well, Black Americans, Black Canadians tend to find themselves working in the low-wage sectors of our economy. Okay, that's really difficult for Black Canadians and Black Americans as well to then support an upward mobility trajectory. As a result of that, I do think that our labor force needs to be tweaked a little bit with the appropriate systemic supports built in to allow Black Canadians to participate in the high-wage job opportunities within our labor market.

Getting our Black youth involved early in these kinds of training opportunities to set the mindset, and give them some early experience to enter into these fields are some of the things that we need to do. I also think that we need the labor market itself to support Black Canadians as they work through these opportunities to be there, to support them in terms of providing the internships.

When I say providing the internships, I don't only mean providing money to pay the interns. Also to provide the experience, to provide the training, the learning, the mentorship, the advocacy, the sponsorship. Those are the things that we actually need from the labor force more broadly to support Black Canadians' engagement in the labor force as well as supporting their upward mobility because we know that will be overall better for our society and our productivity as a country.

Heather:
What are the priority actions that you see to better require to better support labor market inclusion for Black communities in Canada?

André:
I might be a little bit biased on this one, but I will immediately say, let's start working with youth early. Because then we give ourselves a really, really long runway to start to support that training. We also give ourselves as a society this space to actually do the training. I wouldn't say that it's extremely difficult, but it is harder to work with someone who is an adult, who has already been trained in a certain area. Who has already been established in a certain field to then retool that individual?

It may even be a bit more expensive, but with youth, it might be a bit easier because then we give ourselves a longer runway. We give ourselves some time for reflection as well, and we can actually give them an opportunity to practice and to really learn. The next step would be to go to, the point that I was making before, to retool people. In Canada, especially, we noticed that the Black Canadian community is growing, yes, because of natural birth, but because of immigration as well.

These are wonderful, trained individuals who could either be retooled in Canada or go through retooling exercises, or they may be given some exposure to the Canadian workforce to be able to integrate into the workforce in rapid time, for example. The other element that I would like to highlight is something that you may notice, and I've heard from my colleagues who have said this. That in the Black community in particular, Black women are the bedrock of our Black community. They are the entrepreneurs in our Black community.

We find that they don't participate to the same level as men in, say, entrepreneurship or, say, in the workforce broadly. There are a number of factors for that. Being able to also support Black women in terms of their inclusion and engagement in the labor force, not only as workers but also as entrepreneurs who will then stimulate the economy and create even more jobs. Especially for youth, especially for Black immigrants as they come into Canada and readjust to their new home.

Heather:
Thank you so much, André. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to add?

André:
I know this might be a bit challenging, but I'll put it out there and I'll ask our society broadly to be bold about this. That celebrating the excellence and the accomplishments of Black workers I think it's something that would be really well appreciated. It will actually support and motivate Black Canadians to engage even more deeply in our labor market. One may say, "Well, why are you specifically celebrating, Black Canadians only?"

The reason why I would bring that up is that when you look across a community that is working and doing a great job of emancipating themselves from the sense of victimhood over many, many decades. Being able to celebrate their accomplishments is really going to be something that I think will also support and motivate them engaging in the labor market and also really bring others along as well. That recognition is just good for community building.

That's something that I would definitely encourage to just see that engagement around celebrating the accomplishment of those who do well in this field. Also supporting and celebrating the allies who actually support the Black community because that will then bring on more allies and really create a larger sense of community. Maybe one day you and I may not necessarily need to talk about this anymore. This will just become something that is a norm in our Canadian culture and society.

Heather:
Thank you so much, André. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

André:
Thank you so much, Heather, for having me. I do appreciate speaking with you today as well.

Heather:
I'm speaking with Mohamed Elmi, who's the Executive Director of the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University. Welcome, Mohamed.

Mohamed Elmi:
Thank you very much and thank you for the opportunity to speak on this very important topic.

Heather:
I'm wondering, Mohamed, what do we know about Black communities' inclusion in education and employment in Canada?

Mohamed:
One of the things that we know, the Black community still faces barriers, particularly the pathways to employment, K-12 education, tertiary education. There's still many barriers for them. We understand students are not graduating at the same levels. They're being suspended at higher proportions than other groups. Once they do finish their K-12 education, they're not going into universities. Once in universities or colleges, some of the programs that they do go into don't have the same employment outcomes as in the STEM programs.

One of the main issues that it impacts is the pathways to employment. Generally speaking, the poverty rates among racialized groups, not just Black individuals, decreases from one generation to the next, but this is particularly not true for the Black population. Why is that? I think it is because of many Black individuals have given up on the education system because they view it as part of a systemic barrier that reinforces anti-Black racism.

Work that we have done at the Diversity Institute has shown that 50% of students have said that their school was not inclusive, whether in high school or university education. This leads to income differences. Even if they have a similar education, similar skills, Black individuals are still paid less compared to other non-racialized individuals and the general population itself. There are other barriers such as access to resources and limited role model support as well, mentors, afterschool programs, things like that, and other things like the socioeconomic circumstances.

This was particularly true during the height of the pandemic when students were learning virtually. What we found were Black students were disadvantaged in many instances because of their socioeconomic status. They didn't have multiple laptop computers with high-speed internet to be able to access the virtual environment. That was an eye-opening experience. Through a program that we developed called Study Buddy, matching tutors who needed a work placement experience with the students who needed this showed those stark differences as well.

Heather:
What do we know about strategies and things that work to support the advancement of Black communities in the workplace and in entrepreneurship?

Mohamed:
I think one of the things that has proven to work in our experience and through the programs that we've delivered has been programs that are geared towards skills training, digital skills, and through programs that we run for people who are already in the workforce and are getting new skills. Another aspect is mentorship. Mentorship for the people who are getting into the workforce, whether they're immigrant students or changing careers. Also getting them ready for leadership and more senior management type of positions.

The skills training is an entryway. Networking is an entryway into improving representation, particularly for a Black community. Keep in mind, the Black community, about 60% of them are immigrants. One of the things we know about immigrant research is they don't have the same social capital as people who've been here longer. That social capital does make a difference. Who you know, whether you're an entrepreneur looking for a job or business and clients, or you are an individual who's looking for a job, career, et cetera, those networks, the mentors make a huge, huge difference.

Connecting people to those types of resources as well. We've particularly found this through our BACEL, Black African Canadian Entrepreneurship Leadership Program, a pilot funded by the Future Skills Centre. We've found that it's often that network that is generated in those sessions that allows people to feel like, "Okay, I'm having this particular issue. I know somebody who could help me with it. I am looking for this particular skill set. This is how I can navigate it as well." Oftentimes it's about confidence building.

Heather:
What do you see as the priority areas for action and for research on this topic?

Mohamed:
For us, I think it's going to be really important to understand the impact of climate change. We understand it has a higher impact on those who have a lower socioeconomic status just because they cannot afford to move. Some of the issues around immigration because of climate change around the world is going to bring those issues to Canada. Understanding and preparing for that is one area that we want to understand. We understand also the issue of equity, diversity, and inclusion, an aspect of violence sustainability for longer term.

How do you ensure programs are adaptive to the issues that are faced by people who are disproportionately impacted by climate change? Another thing that I also want to say is I think we are going to be focused more on the skills gaps. I think providing training and trialing and piloting different approaches to what works, virtual in-person, wraparound supports to ensure people feel that they can participate wholeheartedly in a program without having to worry about, can I actually afford to take the two-hour commute to take a program that I don't know if it'll work or not.

I think those are important. Building on the Skills for Success program, for example, is another good one. All of this, I think we have to test, we have to constantly evaluate to see what the recipients are. How it's impacting them and what could be improved because I think at the end of the day, it's about continuous learning, both for us as people who are providing the programming and the training, et cetera. Also for the participants of the programs.

In addition to the inclusive approaches to climate change and sustainability, I think it's really important that we have and pilot digital skills training, particularly for Black youth or the Black population in general. It's important that we pilot, test, retest things that are working and things that could be working in order to better prepare individuals for an ever-changing digital landscape with new tools and techniques that are constantly emerging. Disrupting the work that they're already doing and the work that they're training to do to ensure that they're adaptable and flexible well into the future.

Heather:
Why is inclusion of equity-deserving groups within our workplaces and within our economy so important?

Mohamed:
It's such a fundamental thing. Research shows over and over and over again, being an inclusive organization leads to many, many tangible benefits for the organization. Research has shown you become a little bit more profitable if you have more women or diverse people in your staff. You discover new potential markets that you might not have known about. New innovative techniques and tools that you might have not been aware of. You'll reduce reputational risk if you do or say the wrong thing because you are blinded to a particular issue and you do something that many might view as wrong.

Remember, people vote with their dollars, with organizations they view as having similar beliefs as them. If they believe that this organization is not inclusive, they will go to an organization and give their money to that organization. You as an organization, it's important to your bottom line. If you want to improve your bottom line, the studies have shown this over and over again. You get your staff who are happier to work in an organization that they feel is inclusive and reducing your turnover costs that you might have because of it.

Heather:
Thanks, Mohamed. Before we wrap up, do you have any final thoughts?

Mohamed:
Some of the things that I think are really important, I think we have to understand that education is key. We have to focus on improving outcomes of Black students, whether it's

through the supports, additional supports at the K-12 level, ensuring that students have the awareness. Not everybody wants to go to university, but the ability to have that. I often tell the story of-- I never knew what streaming was, even though I sort of experienced it personally. When I was in grade 10, I joined parent-teacher council.

The math teacher told my mother that, "No, Mohamed is struggling in math. You should take him from level one math to level three math." This is in New Brunswick. At the time I probably wasn't paying attention in school and didn't really want to be in school anyways during the teenage years. My mother asked a series of questions. The first one was, "If he takes level three math, does that mean he can't go to university?" The teacher at the time said, "Yes, it's not one that qualifies for university education."

My mom said, "Well, I don't want to close that option off just yet." Keep in mind, I'm a grade 10 student. She was like, "What is the next level that he can still go to university with?" That was level two math. I probably would have gone to level three math, which would have been easier, made my life, I wouldn't have to do as much trigonometry and all of that fun stuff. I had an advocate in that moment who sort of knew that I should not close off the option from that.

Now I have a PhD in information systems, a commerce degree. It's one of those things that had somebody said, my path been closed at that age, what I have been here now. It's really important that we give everybody the opportunity, even if they don't end up wanting to go to university. Giving the individuals the opportunity to fulfill whatever it is that they want to do. Education is really, really important for that.

Heather:
Thank you so much, Mohamed. It was great to speak with you.

Mohamed:
Thank you.

Heather:
It's imperative that we close the gaps in education and employment between Black and non-Black Canadians. As we've heard today, achieving equity and inclusion in the workforce requires systemic change and combating anti-Black racism. Targeted, holistic programming that prioritizes community connections and identity is crucial.

I'd like to thank our guests, Kofi, André, and Mohamed for your thoughtful analyses and inspirational recommendations. Thanks to our listeners for tuning into this important conversation. If you've enjoyed this episode, please subscribe and recommend to others to take a listen. I'm your host, Heather McIntosh. Until next time.

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