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The Future Skills Podcast

Season 4: Mini Episode 2
Labour Market Data & Disruption – Insights from FSC @ Cannexus25

In this special live mini episode of the Future Skills Podcast, recorded at Cannexus25 in Ottawa, host Jeremy Strachan explores how labour market information (LMI) is shaping career development, workforce planning, and skills training in a time of rapid change. Featuring insights from Jason Dennison (Fleming College), Tony Bonen (The Conference Board of Canada), and Tricia Williams (Future Skills Centre), the discussion unpacks how data-driven decision-making can help job seekers, educators, and policymakers navigate economic shifts, automation, and AI's growing influence on the labour market.

From understanding regional job trends to leveraging tools like OpportuNext for career transitions, this episode highlights the critical role of LMI in building a resilient workforce. What skills will be in demand? How can Canadians future-proof their careers? And, how do we make labour market data more accessible and actionable? We'll hear three expert perspectives on the evolving skills ecosystem and what it means for the future of work.

Guests

Jason Dennison, Director of Business Intelligence & Analytical Services, Fleming College

Tony Bonen, Executive Director of Economic Research, The Conference Board of Canada

Tricia Williams, Director of Research, Evaluation, and Knowledge Mobilization, the Future Skills Centre

Host

Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate, The Conference Board of Canada

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:
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Transcript

Jeremy Strachan:
Welcome to a special live episode of the Future Skills Podcast. I'm your host, Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate at The Conference Board of Canada. This episode was recorded in Ottawa, Ontario, at Cannexus25—Canada's largest conference on career development and workforce innovation. Cannexus is an annual event hosted by CERIC, an organization that advances education, research and advocacy in career counselling and development. Cannexus brings together educators, employers, policymakers, and researchers to share ideas and explore solutions to the biggest challenges in the world of work.

One of the many highlights at Cannexus25 was a plenary session organized by the Future Skills Centre on leveraging labour market information, or LMI, for career mapping, training, and upskilling decisions. In this moment of looming labour market uncertainty, we need to know how to work with big data to understand and navigate a complex and dynamic workforce environment. In this mini episode, we'll dig into this more with The Conference Board's Tony Bonen, and FSC's Tricia Williams. We'll also hear from Fleming College's Jason Dennison on why LMI is more than numbers and data.

What exactly is LMI? When we talk about labour market information, we're talking about all the data and insights about jobs, industries, skills, and the people who make up the workforce. It includes everything from employment rates and wages to the demand for specific skills, regional job trends, and forecasts about how things like automation and sustainability will impact the labour market.

For researchers and economists, LMI is a vital tool to understand our economy's health and pinpoint opportunities and challenges. For example, if data shows a decline in certain manufacturing jobs due to automation, policymakers and training providers can respond by creating programs to help workers transition to growing fields like technology or renewable energy.

Jason Dennison is the Director of Business Intelligence at Fleming College in Peterborough Ontario. He took part in FSC's panel at Cannexus. I asked him why all of us should be paying attention to what the data tells us.

Jason: Let's conceptualize it in a way that if I'm speaking to a grade school about jobs, about the economy, I'm going to use things like, "Where [do] your parents work? Where do you want to work? What type of job do you want to have? What community do you think you want to work in?" All of these are the elements, the data points, if you will, of labour market information.

And I think that when we take the economist lens, which is so critical because that's the theory behind LMI, when we try to ground truth it, we want to say: jobs. It's jobs. I think that's the critical point for people. So that's in the back of my mind when we do this research. And getting in front of people, you know: What's the situation for jobs in your community?

I mean, "What are you hearing?" And that's probably the best leading question that we use often is, "What are you hearing about jobs?" And then we can use all types of occupational taxonomies, industry taxonomies, and convolute and complicate the issue, or we can be listening and say, okay, somebody just wants to know about how many jobs are in my community.

And whoever that audience is, that's the user of LMI. We spent a lot of time about constructing it, but really it is, "Who's your user of LMI in your community? Are you meeting them where they are at? Are you providing them information where they are at?" If you say the word LMI and it's not answering that person's question, it stops right there.

Jeremy: The conversation around workforce readiness and career development has changed in the last several years, and the skills you need when you start a new job might not be the skills you'll need to thrive in that role in the near future.

Tony Bonen is the Executive Director of Economic Research at The Conference Board of Canada. He was at Cannexus and I asked him to offer his perspective on the impacts of change and uncertainty that Canada's labour market should expect to bear.

[To Tony]: I know that AI is top of mind on pretty much everyone's agenda right now in terms of its impact on the skills ecosystem. What are you seeing as an economist in the work you and your team are doing in terms of its impact in Canada?

Tony: I think there's really two levels that we need to think about this. One is, there's going to be disruption across sectors. Some sectors will be growing, and jobs within those sectors growing, and others becoming smaller in their relative size, in terms of the number of people working in those jobs. And then of course, within a sector, within a job, within a company even, there's going to be shifts in terms of what you do day to day, and your tasks are going to augment and change.

And I think this is something people really need to keep in mind, that new technology is not simply going to wipe out jobs or suddenly overhaul the set of tasks that one has in the job. It's going to augment what you're doing day to day, hopefully find efficiencies in what you're doing and that will over time shift the number of people you need in different roles and different positions within a company.

How that plays out, it's not very clear right now, but we are developing different scenarios, forecasts around technology trends, the impacts on productivity that this new technology will bring, and that's very much the positive side of things, to give a bit of clarity on that.

We suspect, I would say broadly, there's going to be an increasing need for critical reasoning and use of these new technologies. But there is going to be disruption, especially in that, what is traditionally safe, more white-collar jobs, where you might have gone to university, you might be specializing in a certain field of, of doing

analysis or document processing or something like that. And it's those types of jobs outside the manual ones, those more cognitive jobs that are going to be affected in a way that we really haven't seen before with previous rounds of technology. How that plays out is a bit uncertain, but there's an opportunity, I think for people in those types of roles, those white-collar jobs to sort of level up, see how they can make best use of that technology. And that's going to put them in a more competitive advantage when things do start to change in the coming years.

Jeremy: So with all this change ahead, how can job seekers and career development professionals leverage all the data points that economists are using to forecast these trends? OpportuNext is a tool that was created in 2021 by the Conference Board in partnership with FSC. Drawing from LMI, it lets users explore careers paths by matching skillsets and offers a practical view of career options by mapping skills to relevant occupations. Since its launch, the Conference Board has been continually finding ways to improve OpportuNext. I asked Tony to talk about what plans are for the next version of the tool.

Tony: Sure, so yeah, OpportuNext has been around for a number of years. It comes out of this era where we were developing skill-matching algorithms trying to identify different career pathways that are outside of what one would normally think of like, "Oh, I'm working in in this job and I can just get promoted in that same field."

There's a lot of relationships, similar kind of tasks, techniques, skills one applies and jobs that might be slightly outside their field. And the idea was to develop a tool like OpportuNext that allows you to start with a job or now more recently start with an educational field and say, "What are the types of jobs or similar jobs on a skill basis that I could maybe move into that I could consider as my next step in my career."

That was really the origin of OpportuNext. We're working on it now to hone it more towards this career development space. So it's very timely that we're here at Cannexus because we want to have this tool fit into those interventions career development practitioners are making every day with young people; mid-career workers looking to navigate opportunities the career market. OpportuNext gives you a foundation, a solid base of knowledge to understand what are the opportunities that are out there, what's similar, what's dissimilar. But it still, I think, needs that personal context and that guidance and that open conversation that will still be happening with a person one on one in that career guidance session until, of course, generative AI becomes so good that they can replace that job.

And I think that's quite a ways away. But that's really where we see this tool going, giving a foundation, a framework for understanding those different pathways that are available and then allowing that conversation to happen at a more individual level.

Jeremy: Tricia Williams is the Director of Research, Evaluation and Knowledge Mobilization at FSC. She was at Cannexus to moderate the plenary session. We found some time to chat about FSC and LMI, and to get her take on the state of skills in Canada.

[To Tricia]: I wanted to ask you a few questions about what FSC has been doing with this thing we call LMI or labor market information. Can you tell us about some of the initiatives that FSC has undertaken to harness its power?

Tricia: Yeah, happy to. Labour market information is really at the core of understanding how to better equip Canadians for the future of work. And, you know, I think we've known from the very start of the Future Skills Centre's work that producing and using labour market information is going to be so critical to reaching that future state that we all want.

So, over the last five years, we've funded hundreds of projects and at least half of them are using labour market information in some way. I think some of the most notable ones have been the really path breaking work that we've done with Conference Board on OpportuNext to really build data and produce data into a forecasting and very user-focused tool that people can plug in, you know, the job that they have now and where they want to get to, to understand where the market demand is moving.

Some other work we did with the Labor Market Information Council was to really focus on building a data hub and kind of the background data rails or data infrastructure, you know, produce that in a way that we have, you know, what's called APIs and that developers could use and build, you know, apps and things.

We have a vision for what labour market information could be in the future. But I'd also like to mention that a lot of the projects that we're funding and supporting and the various innovations in communities and provinces across Canada involve some sort of production of what different markets and communities need, what different sectors need, and how to use that information to make better decisions.

So I'd say there's both a big LMI play. But also a very micro LMI play and how do we integrate LMI more in the business of skills development and career guidance.

Jeremy: That's really interesting, and that's actually leading me to another question that I had for you around the skills piece, and I'm just wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about how the state of skills have changed in the last few years. I know that skills gaps and the disconnect between labour market demand and new talent, it's something we hear over and over again. And I would love to hear how that question sits with you.

Tricia: Well, it's such an important question. And I think, you know, most of the last few years we've been talking about how important social and emotional skills are, collaboration, these kinds of future-proof skills.

But I'd say actually we have a lot of good information, including some recent data from. It's a big global study that's done on adult skills called the PIAAC, which is the Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies. That's a mouthful. But what we basically mean is it compares Canadian skills to that of other peer countries, and there's some good news in there.

We found that Canada saw a significant improvement in numeracy. We're doing above average compared to peers, and we're seeing less decline in adult literacy than in other countries. So we're kind of holding our ground, and we're also seeing some strong performance in adaptive problem solving. So I think overall Canada's performing pretty well on skills.

But there's much more to be done. I mean, more than ever, it's going to be important for us to think about upskilling, reskilling, getting the critical current skills like AI, digital technologies, making sure that we are really doing well at investing in those. Because the world keeps changing, and we can't stay static as a country.

Jeremy: Thanks again for joining for this bonus mini episode of the Future Skills Podcast. Much of this episode's audio was captured at Cannexus25 in Ottawa, Ontario. Thanks to CERIC for having me. I'd like to thank my guests Tricia Williams from FSC, and Tony Bonen from the Conference Board, and Jason Dennison from Fleming College. You can hear all four seasons of the *Future Skills Podcast* on your favourite podcast app. Give us a follow if you haven't already, to stay tuned for the next season. This episode was produced, edited and hosted by me, Jeremy Strachan. Sound design also by yours truly. Thanks for listening.