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The Future Skills Podcast

Season 6: Episode 2

A Workforce to Build Big

In this episode of the Future Skills Podcast, we focus on Canada's big build moment—when major infrastructure, industrial expansion, and nation-building projects are converging with profound workforce pressures. Host Jeremy Strachan is joined by former Ontario Minister of Labour and Infrastructure Monte McNaughton to explore why apprenticeships, early pathways into the skilled trades, and labour mobility are essential as retirements accelerate and demand surges. We then hear from Mike Gordon, Director of Canadian Training of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, who unpacks why training quality, credential recognition, and national standards are critical to mobilizing a skilled workforce—without taking risky shortcuts. We close with Pari Johnston, President and CEO of Colleges and Institutes Canada, who makes the case for public colleges as the backbone of Canada's skills ecosystem, and what it will take to deliver training at the speed, scale, and quality needed to prepare workers for an AI-driven economy.

Guests

Monte McNaughton, Co-Chair, Future Skills Centre Resilient Workforce Working Table

Mike Gordon, Director of Canadian Training, United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters

Pari Johnston, President and CEO, Colleges and Institutes Canada

Host

Jeremy Strachan, Manager, Education & Skills, Signal49 Research

Links

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United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters: <https://www.uacanada.ca/>

Colleges and Institutes Canada: <https://www.collegesinstitutes.ca/>

Signal49 Research, *Building Under Pressure: Skilled Trades Shortages and Rising Construction Costs*. Ottawa, Signal49 Research, November 24, 2025.

Statistics Canada. *Changes in the population of tradespeople between 2016 and 2021*. Education, Learning and Training Research Paper Series, September 26, 2024.
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Transcript

Jeremy: Welcome to Season Six of the Future Skills Podcast, brought to you by the Future Skills Centre. I'm Jeremy Strachan, Manager of Education & Skills at Signal49 Research, and your host for the season. On the Future Skills Podcast, we explore what matters most to Canadians when it comes to skills, training, and the ever-changing world of work.

Since 2019, the Future Skills Centre has been driving Canada's workforce transformation by funding innovative training solutions, cutting-edge research, and inclusive partnerships to ensure everyone has the skills to thrive in a changing economy.

In this episode, we explore what it's going to take for Canada to deliver on its major infrastructure ambitions: A workforce to build big. We begin with Monte McNaughton, former Ontario Minister of Labour and Infrastructure and Co-Chair of the Future Skills Centre's Resilient Workforce Working Table. He explains why apprenticeships, early exposure to the skilled trades, and labour mobility are essential to meeting what lies ahead. Then we hear from Mike Gordon, Director of Canadian Training of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, on why strong training systems and nationally recognized standards are critical to mobilizing a skilled workforce. Finally, I speak with Pari Johnston, President and CEO of Colleges and Institutes Canada, who makes the case for public colleges as a cornerstone of our future-ready workforce.

Canada's current wave of nation-building projects spans housing, energy, transportation, and industrial infrastructure at a scale not seen in decades. The federal government projects hundreds of billions of dollars in planned capital investment over the coming years, alongside targets to dramatically accelerate housing construction and major project delivery. At the same time, StatsCan forecasts that more than a quarter-million skilled trades workers are expected to retire this decade, even as governments and industry anticipate the need for hundreds of thousands of additional workers to meet construction and infrastructure ambitions.

Up first is Monte McNaughton to set some of the context and tell us a bit about how the Future Skills Centre is bringing people to the table from across sectors to tackle these challenges head on.

Welcome to the Future Skills Podcast, Monte. Thank you for being here with me today.

Monte McNaughton: Well, Jeremy, really excited for our discussion and glad to be here.

Jeremy: Let's start by talking about the Future Skills Centre Resilient Workforce Working Table that you co-chair. Can you talk a little about that?

Monte: The focus of Future Skills Centre is bringing amazing partners around a table to really chart forward a path to ensuring that we have a highly skilled, trained workforce in every region of Canada. So, my view on training is that we can't have one-size-fits-all. I mean, you think of Southwestern Ontario, where I'm from—heavily focused on the automotive economy. You have jurisdictions in British Columbia, Northern Ontario—big presence of the forestry industry. On the East Coast, it's different. So I think that's been one of the things that I've really enjoyed about co-chairing this Working Table is that we're getting that input from across Canada to ensure that

there's going to be training programs and a training approach to workers that's going to really take local needs into account.

If you just look at the members of the working table, I mean, [they] all have really an incredible background from all different walks of life. I mean, you have [the] manufacturing sector being represented. You have the Canadian Building Trades Union with a representative. You have universities and colleges and different sectors of the economy, former government ministers with different partisan backgrounds. So, it's really a unique and knowledgeable table that's creating, I think, a really exciting path forward for Canada and for Canadian workers.

Jeremy: Let's talk about what that path looks like. We're entering a period of large-scale infrastructure expansion, which is driven in part by federal priorities and long-term capital planning. And so, from your experience, what are the most important steps that Canada should be taking to strengthen the skills pipeline?

Monte: Yeah, I mean, I view the world that we're living in today as a major opportunity for workers, for employers, for labour and government in general to get big things done for Canadians. We're living in a time where there's a lot of labour disruption, whether it's from AI, of course, the tariffs with Donald Trump, just lots of disruption in the labour markets. I have always said, I mean, from my time as Minister of Infrastructure in Ontario to my time as Minister of Labour, that if we want to build on time and on budget and get these big infrastructure projects built, then we need a skilled workforce to do that. I think of construction specifically, I mean, one in three journeypersons are around the age of 60 today. So, there is a looming crisis in the next few years where a lot of people in the skilled trades are going to be retiring. So, we need to have the future workforce and the future workers to build these iconic legacy projects.

Jeremy: Ok, so with this aging workforce and the urgency around that and the scale of projects ahead, especially across domestic supply chains, what role do apprenticeships and skills pathways play in making sure workers and firms are ready to build at scale?

Monte: I know for a fact that apprenticeship pathways are going to be hugely important to the manufacturing sector. It's interesting because in the province of Ontario alone and many others, there's well over 140 skilled trades to choose from. A lot of people think about construction, but there's more. There's a lot of skilled trades when it comes to manufacturing. This is where I really see the value of promoting apprenticeship pathways at a younger age. We need to still continue on ending the stigma around apprenticeships and the skilled trades in general. I mean, there's as much merit in being a boilermaker or an electrician as there is in being a banker or a lawyer.

And I remember when we set out back in 2019 to reform the apprenticeship system in Ontario, we surveyed hundreds of young people. And we noticed a few things. Number one, the biggest challenge to encouraging young people to get into apprenticeships or the skilled trades came from parents. They thought that their child needed to go to university to be successful, but we know there's nothing further from the truth. Like people in the skilled trades make 6 figures with pensions and benefits and you can build a family around. We also know that health and safety is hugely important and valued by young people. That's why we really pushed to encourage and make employers have safer workplaces because young people want to work safely. So, there's

all of these things that contribute to stigmas around the skilled trades and we need to bust those down. Governments need to introduce the skilled trades at a much younger age.

And then specifically around manufacturing, I think this is a huge opportunity where employers can provide a lot of training. I mean, I know in the town of Wallaceburg in Southwestern Ontario, there was a tool and die maker and they brought in an instructor from a local college to upskill and retrain their current workforce. But that college instructor was like on the shop floor. So, I think there's all kinds of models and innovation in training that can really boost the workforce in manufacturing and ensure that we're building the products of the future.

Jeremy: You've talked about building the pipeline through apprenticeships, but once those people are trained, how do we make sure that they can get to the job sites where those big projects actually are happening and how can we make sure those workers can stay in the labour market?

Monte: Yeah, this is a huge question for governments and politicians and industry leaders right across Canada. This labour mobility has been a huge challenge. I remember in the mid-1980s as a young kid, my dad saying, we can have free trade with other countries, but we can't even have free trade within Canada. And that debate is still happening. And a big piece of that is labour mobility. I mean, one of the projects I'm involved in is the Alto high-speed rail project. We need to attract 51,000 workers for that project. It's going to start, you know, shovels in the ground in 2029, 2030 to build that Montreal to Ottawa high-speed segment. And we need workers from all over the country to come. And that's the same for nuclear projects, mines, the wind project in Nova Scotia, pipelines in Alberta. I mean, the list goes on and on and on. So, governments need to seize this opportunity and, as quickly as possible, ensure that there's labour mobility and recognition of credentials across the country.

Jeremy: Last question I have for you is, how can we modernize our training systems across colleges, across apprenticeship programs, across these industry partnerships, so that we have a future-ready workforce that is going to meet the needs of these big infrastructure projects?

Monte: Yeah, I mean, for me, this really reminds me of coming out of the pandemic, like the world of training people in Canada really changed. I think like the important thing is, for example, in the skilled trades, younger people should have these opportunities presented to them much earlier. So, one concrete thing that we did in Ontario—once a student completes their grade 10 successfully, they're able to start a full-time apprenticeship in certain trades. And the reason is because the average age of an apprentice is around 29 or 30. We need to have journeypersons around 18 to 20 years old. So, they need to start younger. And what that does for that individual, it allows them to earn while they learn. They won't be saddled with, you know, hundreds of thousands in debt in some cases, but it also creates really a level playing field with other countries. I mean, Germany and the UK have great apprenticeship programs where people are journeypersons around the age of 18 or 19 years old. So, I think that's one concrete thing that should be done is—start training at a younger age when kids are interested. It also means reform of the education system.

And then for current workers out there to face labour disruptions from AI and tariffs, it's really about upskilling and retraining the current workforce. And I think that speaks to what Future Skills Centre is doing and the Workforce Resilience Working Table is looking at is, like

employer-led training, labour-led training, trade associations being involved in training and have that short duration training could be partnering with labour unions, partnering with colleges and universities, but speed is of the essence. It's no longer about three, four, five-year degrees. It's about, you know, getting in, locating those workers and upskilling them as quickly as possible. So, I think this is an opportunity for Canadians to build a brighter future for themselves and their families and ultimately for Canada as a country.

Jeremy: Monte, thank you again for your time and joining me on the Future Skills Podcast. It was fantastic to speak with you.

Monte: Well, thanks for having me and let's do it again sometime.

Jeremy: Monte makes the case that apprenticeships and early pathways into the skilled trades are essential if Canada is going to meet the scale of what's coming. But building the pipeline is only part of the equation. Deploying skilled workers to where the jobs are raises another set of challenges. Mike Gordon is Director of Canadian Training of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, or UA, representing 62,000 skilled tradespersons across 10 Red Seal piping trades. He brings a systems-level view of how trades training works in practice, where labour mobility breaks down, and why national standards are critical if we want to deliver major infrastructure projects on time and on budget. Mike welcome to the podcast.

Mike Gordon: Thank you for having me.

Jeremy: I want to start by asking you where UA fits into the training ecosystem, and how the union supports training of its members?

Mike: The UA forms the infrastructure for pipe trades training across the country. Whether it's in our union training centres or in community colleges, typically our subject matter experts are engaged to partake in either, obviously, within our own structure, but also in the community colleges. This is about making sure that Canadians are trained in the full scope of the trades that we represent. If we look out for the integrity of the trades that we represent and making sure that they're strong, making sure they have a broad opportunity for the participants of those trades, then there's always going to be opportunities for our members.

We invest substantially. The UA expands upwards of 300 million [dollars] to train our members through the infrastructure, not just across Canada, but also the United States. What we have to do is ensure that these are—it's not a luck game here. This is about preparation meeting opportunity. We don't believe in just kind of responding. We believe in being proactive. So, the investments that we put out there is really important for us. We constantly deliver innovative training programs. Our ear is always to the ground when we talk about technology and changes for either the materials that are to be installed, the technologies for power sector and energy delivery, all of the new things that are coming, we're typically first to the ground to know what it is and to be prepared with a workforce that is qualified and ready to do so and maintain a level of quality control that our contractors, owners, and clients have grown to expect from us.

Jeremy: Canada's a big place, with lots of work to be done. Our first guest hinted that labour mobility is a huge issue, and that workplace safety is a top priority for the next generation of skilled trades workers, and moving that workforce across provinces is challenging. So, tell us more about what needs to happen to do to get tradespersons to where they're needed.

Mike: A person in one jurisdiction, whether province or territory, anywhere in Canada, is traveling to another jurisdiction, despite being qualified, they have to go to that new province to repeat safety certification elements that they already have. It's a deterrence for people to participate in travel, to build the infrastructure for the ambitious projects that lie ahead for nation building. Well, how can we fix it? We need to be able to have national recognition of safety certifications. If we have it where you can take a safety certification in one location right now, and when you go to the other location in Canada, they're telling you that, well, we won't accept it because ours is to a higher standard, and then vice versa, then it's not really about safety, is it? It's actually about money.

So how do we fix it? We get rid of the monetization. This is going to have a massive positive impact if we're able to do this inter-provincial recognition of safety certifications for the following reasons. Now, mobilization of Canada's workforce, it's much faster, but also you've expanded the access of workforce that you can engage. Let's not focus in trying to merge all safety certifications to say everybody's going to be rigid and use the exact same training. But what we can do is we can have a type of safety model after the Red Seal Occupational Standard and make a safety occupational standard that lists every safety certification and just like any Red Seal occupational standard, it can be modified, expanded, refined, and most importantly, validated by all the participating jurisdictions.

Look, we were talking with some of our contractor partners. We have a wealth of case studies on this, where they have had folks trained in one jurisdiction, and they're on a project, they're doing, let's call it mining work. All of the safety protocols and related certifications that they needed to do, they're utilizing there. They have to travel. There's a big call in another jurisdiction, we'll call it New Brunswick, and they've got to switch over. And the same crew working for the same contractor, that's a Canada-wide contractor, and working for the same client that when they went through this process and they moved that workforce from the first job site in the one jurisdiction, they traveled them out to the other jurisdiction, they did the exact same safety training developed and delivered by the exact same entity that has offices in different parts of the country. Why? Because they would not recognize the training that their other office provided in the other province. It's something that's so crazy to think of that it exists that way.

And we know how to fix it. We have a model to fix it. Let's get together and do it. And I think the leadership that's in place all across the country—federal level, jurisdictional level—all folks that we've talked to are working in a way that is symbiotic. Everybody has their constituents, Canadians at heart, and not just for getting the jobs done, but being able to make sure that we are not dependent outside of Canada. We have such a world-renowned system in Red Seal for the mobility of Canada's workforce. And then we have these little speed bumps along the way that, though they're little, have a magnificent, detrimental effect on the mobilization of our workforce to meet the nation builder projects that our Prime Minister is pushing forward.

Jeremy: So what *do* Canadians need to know about moving forward when it comes to meeting the needs of these ambitious infrastructure and building plans? As governments and industry feel real pressure to move faster, what do you want Canadians and decisionmakers to keep in mind, so we don't solve short-term labour challenges in ways that undermine the long-term strength and integrity of the trades?

Mike: We don't want to take three steps forward to just take two steps back for the longer-term investment of our time, of our resources. When there's a level of urgency that's put forward to say, "This has to happen now or this is all going to fall apart," a lot of steps of quality control fall by the wayside. There's a level of responsibility for both our federal, provincial/territorial governments to ensure that we don't weaken trade regulations and we don't try to create mini-systems at the expense of bigger, proven systems. And what do I mean by that? Micro-credentials.

Jeremy: Micro-credentials? Tell me more.

Mike: Micro-credentials haven't been really broadly and appropriately defined in a way that all folks understand. That's why our prerequisites for a micro-credential are this simple: If it impacts a trade that exists, a Red Seal Trade, you must first be the registered apprentice and/or journeyperson of that trade. None of us want to see our trades torn down. What does that do? It devalues that occupation. It lessens the potential for that longevity of that career. If you pull a piece out of a trade and create a micro-credential, you're weakening that trade and you're displacing the rightfully qualified person from participating in the trade that they qualified, albeit the right way, by going through the entire system as per the respective trade regulations and as per best practice.

I'll give you the scenario of a doctor. You don't have a ears, nose, and throat specialist that went out and took a one-year course. You don't have a brain surgeon that went out and took a two-year course and now they're a brain surgeon. No, they are foundationally a doctor first. Downstream of that, they get additional specializations. When we get licensed in any of the trades that we represent, they call it a journeyperson. So, when you complete your whole apprenticeship and then you go write your qualification exam and you pass that exam, it's a rite of passage. A journeyperson means it constitutes the beginning of your continued journey. You have this full range of understanding.

So, when we're talking about micro-credentialing, we're saying the danger's ahead. We have all these ambitions and the nature to try to take shortcuts to say we're going to create more jobs. That's not being responsible. It's not stewardship. It's about patch and band-aid work. And we're looking at people that are doing this important work that impacts lives, we need to make sure that they're qualified.

Jeremy: Mike, thanks so much.

Mike: Thank you very much. Appreciate the opportunity to speak. We're all in this together.

Jeremy: Mike's point is clear: Canada already has strong training systems in the skilled trades, but fragmentation around mobility and certification can become a barrier to deliver when urgency is highest. If we want to avoid shortcuts and build at the speed and scale these projects demand, we need institutions that can train, retrain, and support workers wherever projects are taking place.

That brings us to the critical role of Canada's public colleges. As anchors in communities across the country—and central players in apprenticeship and workforce development—colleges are essential in translating that ambition into capacity.

Pari Johnston is President and CEO of Colleges and Institutes Canada, and she's going to tell us why post-secondary institutions are going to be more important than ever in getting Canada building big.

Pari, welcome. It's great to speak with you.

Pari Johnston: Thanks so much. I'm happy to be here.

Jeremy: Great. So, let's get right into it. What role must colleges play in Canada's economic reset—so in the in training, in upskilling, and in partnering with industry as we embark on all of these big, ambitious infrastructure plans?

Pari: Thanks, Jeremy. I think that is the question of the day, if you will. We're really at a critically important time in terms of thinking of future workforce development in light of Canada's national missions. The future for our major projects of national importance, our defence readiness imperative—the path has to run through our public college system. And I fundamentally believe that for a couple of reasons. One is that through the most recent federal budget, there were some really important investments in those, as you mentioned, major infrastructure projects, major energy projects, initiatives to build new trade and transport corridors to move our energy products across the country. And the new major projects office in Calgary was set up to help really accelerate the permitting, the financing, the legal aspects of those major projects.

What's missing is the people strategy. We need a people pipeline to build those other pipelines and I think this is where the public college system comes in, particularly because we are in those places where most of these projects are going to take place. You can basically say that 95% of Canadians live within 50 kilometres of one of our members' institutions across the country. Which means we're in those rural remote communities where these major projects are going to need to be built. These are the same communities where we have aging demographics, major labour shortages, communities in transition; and so, our colleges are going to be front and centre in not only upskilling and/or retraining those who've been tariff-affected in some of those traditional sectors, through short-term courses, through rapid response training, to be able to bring them up to standards in new industries or sector-adjacent jobs, but to attract that next generation into the skilled trades, which are going to be needed in spades.

So, we're going to have a critical role because we're in those communities, because we train the people that are needed for these big projects. And because we are the sector that does 70% of Canada's apprenticeship training. I would say, finally, not only train for the particular job readiness, but we train for employability. So, training at our public colleges and polytechnics and institutes means that you get a breadth of training experiences, not only in the classroom, but through skills competitions and other experiences. That means that you are graduating with an employability skill set, coming off and right into jobs that are needed very, very acutely, but you're also able to have a skill set that allows you to be adaptable.

Jeremy: Building on the idea of adaptability, with so many new and alternative training providers entering the landscape, what continues to set post-secondary education apart? And how can the sector deliver training at the scale and speed today's labour market demands?

Pari Johnston: There's a quality assurance that comes having gone through the public training system, through all of the quality assurance pieces that are regulated by the different provinces, first of all. So, I think that's important. Second of all, it's the breadth of programming, right? So, you know, unlike, say, a union training centre that might be training for a particular trade or skill, you're training in a public education space where there's a breadth of programming and breadth of other kinds of experiences like participating in skills competitions, hackathons, different kinds of student experiences that round out the education you're experiencing.

The proximity matters too, Jeremy. So, as I said earlier, if you think about our sector being really represented in communities from coast to coast to coast, we are often the only education deliverer in a community. Many others are more located in larger urban centers, but we're really present in rural communities. We also have a mandate of access, right? I mean, that is a big part of the public training system. Our DNA is focused on open doors, access, and that includes youth in the high school system. You know, there's a really strong dual credit system in many provinces. So, there's that mandate to bring people in to the kinds of skilled training and trades programs that our colleges can then offer.

And then I'd say finally, too, because many of our members now have really developed quite a maturity in offering applied research experiences for students, this is another value add. Twenty-seven thousand of our students a year can participate in an applied learning opportunity, which means that a business or a community organization has brought a problem to the local college or polytechnic and said, can we work with your facilities and your students to help solve it? So, it's that holistic experience that ends up focusing not only on job readiness, but on employability.

Jeremy: So, Pari, last question—big question: Looking ahead, as Canada rebuilds its workforce for major projects and these long-term economic changes, what do colleges need to prioritize now to ensure today's learners are prepared not just for their first job, but for a working life that will keep evolving over the next 20 years?

Pari: I don't have all the answers, but I can provide some where I see some broad trends. The rapid technological change and the role of AI and what I'm seeing across our sector in terms of some very profound thinking about how to not only integrate AI literacy across programs, but to marry that with a very intentional recognition that we have to continue to foster human skills through communication, judgment, empathy, ethics, and how that is married in the pedagogy of the future for public training, I think is incredibly important.

I think that we are going to see a much stronger integration of AI within our public college system from an education delivery, from a pedagogy, from a services point of view, from data analytics, from a governance point of view—I think there's important questions to be asked. So that's one piece. I think as well, you know, I'm really often inspired by my friend and a fabulous thinker, and that's of course Robert Luke from eCampusOntario, and Robert thinks a lot about these things, and he talked over the years about another trend we're going to see is a different way of approaching your credentials, right? That it could be a portfolio approach across different institutions as opposed to sort of an institutionally-driven approach. And I think that's going to be quite interesting for those institutions that are willing to open up their curriculum and their

content and work with others so that it's a student-driven approach to accumulating the kinds of credentials and experiences across different institutions.

I think the role of industry-driven curriculum and industry putting a lot more skin in the game to support the co-development, the co-creation of training. I'm seeing a lot more innovation activity through our continuing ed departments across the college system. And I think that is going to become more and more front of centre as we look to try to scale the training needs for what's coming in the national missions.

The final thing I'm watching for and we're thinking about quite hard is, of course, global talent pipelines, Jeremy. I'm just back from two missions to India. And certainly what I'm seeing is a country that has a huge youth population, a real appetite to focus on system-building partnerships that upskill their students, improve their vocational training systems, and wanting to work with global partners to learn, but also to create talent pipelines between countries to where, we have needs, they have the scale. And we're seeing that in other countries, Germany and Japan are creating some very interesting partnerships in countries like India that relate to workforce development in, I would say, innovative ways. And I think Canada's going to need to think really hard about that.

The final point I'll make is that, you know, the ability to continue to ensure that 10, 20 years from now, our commitment to reconciliation is realized very concretely when we look at our campuses and look at our institutions, both our Indigenous institutes, that they'll have grown in capacity and leadership, and our mainstream institutions will continue to be even more reflective of Indigenous, Métis, First Nations, and Inuit students, that the face of our institutions will be very reflective of Canada's Indigenous communities. So that's something that I think is both an aspiration, but also an imperative.

Jeremy: Pari, thanks so much for joining me on the Future Skills Podcast. It's been a pleasure talking with you today.

Pari: Yeah, thank you, Jeremy. I really appreciated the opportunity.

Jeremy: In this episode, we explored how sector leaders from labour, training and post-secondary are responding to the workforce demands of Canada's next wave of major projects. These conversations underscore both the urgency of the moment and the opportunity it presents if we get skills, training, and mobility right. As Monte, Mike, and Pari emphasized, it's people who will ultimately determine whether or not we rise to the occasion.

My thanks to Monte McNaughton of the Future Skills Centre's Resilient Workforce Working Table, Mike Gordon of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, and Pari Johnston of Colleges and Institutes Canada for joining me.

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