



**Future  
Skills  
Centre**

Centre des  
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Presented by  
**Signal49**  
RESEARCH

# The Future Skills Podcast

## Season 6: Episode 1

### A Future Built on Skills

In this episode of the Future Skills Podcast, we tee up the new season by diving into Canada's hinge moment for talent, productivity, and resilience by revisiting some of the key themes from A Future Build on Skills. This one-day hybrid event from October 2025 brought together thought leaders in skills, training and workforce development. We're joined by the Future Skills Centre's Noel Baldwin in conversation with the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Jobs and Families, exploring an all-hands-on-deck approach to workforce resilience—why soft skills, apprenticeships, and work-integrated learning matter as major projects and trades demand surge. Then JP Giroux, President of the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium, takes us onto the factory floor to unpack how automation and AI are reshaping roles, why SMEs must treat training as strategy, and how a culture of continuous learning drives real productivity gains. We close with Professor Wendy Cukier, Academic Director and Founder of the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University, who makes the case for a national skills agenda centered on SMEs, inclusion (EDI), and scenario planning for AI, and what a blueprint for preparing Canada's workforce for 2026 and beyond looks like.

#### Guests

The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Jobs and Families

Noel Baldwin, Executive Director, The Future Skills Centre

JP Giroux, Executive Director, Excellence in Manufacturing Canada

Wendy Cukier, Academic Director, the Diversity Institute

#### Host

Jeremy Strachan, Manager, Education & Skills, Signal49 Research

#### Links

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

**Future Skills Centre LinkedIn:** <https://www.linkedin.com/company/fsc-ccf>

**Future Skills Centre Bluesky:** <https://bsky.app/profile/fsc-ccf.bsky.social>

**Signal49 Research Homepage:** <https://www.signal49.ca/>

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**A Future Built on Skills (video):** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQ5StWOv8AY>

**EMC (Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium):** [English](#) | [French](#)

**Diversity Institute:** <https://www.torontomu.ca/diversity/>

## 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 tackle Canada's "hinge moment" for skills and work: With major projects on the horizon, the rapid advance of AI and automation, and a growing urgency to build a resilient, sovereign economy. We'll kick things off with The Honourable Patty Hajdu, the Federal Minister of Jobs and Families, and The Future Skills Centre's Noel Baldwin. They'll talk about the importance of soft skills and human judgment, how we can better support youth entering a shifting labour market, and why the trades remain essential to Canada's future. JP Giroux from the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium talks about how advanced manufacturing and AI are reshaping jobs and why SMEs must prioritize training. Finally, the Diversity Institute's Wendy Cukier calls for a national skills agenda aligned with Canada's priorities and urges us to be prepared for greater disruption than ever before.

In October 2025, The Future Skills Centre hosted "A Future Built on Skills," a one-day hybrid event that brought together thought leaders in skills, training and workforce development. All of our guests on the episode were there. A message that came through loud and clear was that Canada is at a pivotal moment. Between accelerating technological change, shifting global pressures, and a wave of major projects planned, our country's future depends on how quickly we can develop and mobilize the skills of our workforce.

We're going to revisit that sense of urgency with a conversation between Noel Baldwin, Executive Director of The Future Skills Centre, and The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Jobs and Families. They unpack what an "all-hands-on-deck" approach looks like, and why building a resilient, adaptable workforce is now a national imperative.

**Noel Baldwin:** Welcome, Minister. Thanks so much for joining us on the Future Skills Podcast.

**Minister Patty Hajdu:** It's great to be with you.

**Noel:** In your opening comments at our conference last fall, A Future Built on Skills, you had remarked that we need to take an all hands on deck approach to addressing the current and some of the anticipated skills gaps in our workforce. Can you talk a little bit more about what that looks like from your perspective in government?

**Minister Hajdu:** Yeah, so thank you very much. And what I would say is that Canada's facing some concurrent challenges. Obviously, the trade war and the impact that's having on very specific sectors is one of those challenges. We're also seeing an aging population with a lot of skilled workers transitioning out of the workforce: Sometimes, in particular in the skilled trades, without the ability to fully knowledge transfer or train the next generation of workers. And then we're also seeing a great acceleration in the use of technology, in particular AI, which is

leaving a high degree of uncertainty in the lives of young people and in certain sectors around how this is going to impact people's work experiences or even positions. And so all of these are compounding to create, I think, a deep degree of uncertainty, in particular in the minds of workers. But I would also say some anxiety in the minds of employers as well, because employers, as they gear up for very specific work, in particular, for example, manufacturing, in major projects, in construction, even in healthcare, they're finding deep gaps in the availability of talent available for their projects. And so when I said that this is an all hands on deck moment, what I meant was it's going to take all of us to withstand all of these kind of concurrent challenges. We really are, as the Prime Minister said, at a point, there is a rupture here. It's a hinge moment for the world, and it's certainly a hinge moment for Canada.

**Noel:** Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And, in particular, as you said: The need to make sure that we have a resilient and sovereign country. And so I want to talk a little bit about what it means to have a resilient workforce. What does that look like for Canada? And what are some of the markers that you look for in thinking about that resilience?

**Minister Hajdu:** Luckily, this is not my first rodeo as a Minister of Employment, and I learned a lot in the last time. But one thing that employers continue to talk about as a deep need is that those soft skills, they're still incredibly important to employers. And for example, some unions, there is an ability for an employer to select from the hiring list, not just based on who's at the top of the list, but based on previous experience in the workplace. And if you are a good relationship builder and you are seen as collaborative and as reliable and as a good communicator and you're seen as a problem solver, these are the kinds of things that will give you an edge in the market. And employers continually talk to me about the need for those soft skills. And those soft skills are not as easily trained as, let's say, the ability to learn how to be an electrician or the ability to provide a specific kind of healthcare, those are difficult skills for sure. But you can learn them in a book or in a class or online as it might be. And you can prove your knowledge through a set of skill testing experiences, including work integrated learning.

So when I think about what we're doing in terms of the support for the development of workers for youth, I think the work integrated learning stuff that we do, including Canada Summer Jobs, which people sort of forget about, but it's a really big investment in early work experience for young people. The other thing I would say is that when we make those investments at the federal level, complementing the labor market transfers that we do that help with specific job searches and job matching and skill development, we also allow for people to explore their interests. I talked to a trades union the other day about how they recruit people, and this man was saying to me, "Many people will say they want to be an electrician. The pay is great. They know that it's actually a stable job. We're going to need electricians for a long time. The machines can't replace us." But then when they realize that their first years, especially, but even as trained electricians means they're going to be climbing up and down ladders with, like, rolls of electrical equipment and feeding line into small confined spaces and dealing with current that sometimes it's not the right thing for people. And so the idea of what the job is doesn't match the reality. So that's why I think the investments that we're making in apprenticeships and obviously future skills, you're doing a lot of this testing what kind of works in terms of attaching people more securely to the labor market and helping people develop the appropriate skills. But, I

think there's nothing beats that hands-on experience for young people in terms of exploring what the future could look like.

**Noel:** Lots of our young people, new grads and people completing studies are also still experiencing the long tail of the COVID experience, where they didn't get as many opportunities to be in places where they built those skills. And then when we started to go back to work, a lot of it for a lot of people was remote, and that still kept them a step apart. And you know, we've heard that youth unemployment is high, youth are feeling really overwhelmed, and you've talked about some of the things that your government is doing to help on that. And when you talk to youth, what are some of the things that you try to convey to them to give them a sense of some hope and optimism and to try to help with some of the anxiety and fear they may be feeling about the future of work?

**Minister Hajdu:** We underplay how resilient young people are. In fact, they're often living an experience that we're not. And I always reflect on my first job for the government as a Minister of Status of Women. And we were actually working on gender-based violence and online violence, in particular, came up at one of the workshops. And this young woman, I said, in a very old way, "Why don't you take a break from the Instagram / Facebook world, if that's where the violence is?" And she said, "Your generation thinks that there's a difference between online life and real life, but there really isn't." We have this integrated experience across the invisible barrier, if you will, and to exit online when you're—predominantly—your peers are living in that space, it actually feels more dangerous. And it was the first time as an old person, and I was, I was almost 50, that I felt like, "Oh wow, like my paradigm shifted," because I was, I'm from a different generation and online was an option and it wasn't really an actual habitat. I'm telling you this story because I think that yes, youth have a lot of anxiety, but they also have a lot of resilience and they're experiencing change in a way that I'm not sure any other generation has ever experienced.

So what I try to tell them is two things. One, that governments at all levels are working to make sure that they have the right support. So very young or very vulnerable people who are really far away from getting a job who need extra supports, we work with organizations, fund those organizations to do that work. And I've visited some of those places and it is incredible the outcomes that they are having for young people who have in many ways given up on themselves or that their communities have given up on. And these organizations say you are worthwhile, you are valuable, and you have purpose. And [two], that *you have purpose* piece is so important to prevent that next iteration of challenges for people that don't feel like there's a place for them. And if we can keep people focused on what brings value to the workplace, we can support people to have adaptability in the core of how you survive being a human in a very challenging time, then we can help that sense of resilience grow in young people.

**Noel:** That sounds like a good opportunity to wrap up on an optimistic note. And so I wanted to ask you, there's lots going on, but what are a couple of things that you're feeling optimistic about that Canadians can look forward to as we're navigating all the change happening around us?

**Minister Hajdu:** I think the first thing I would say I feel incredibly optimistic about is that Canadians are more united than I've ever seen them before. I get emails every single day, calls

from Canadians who say, how can I be part of this? I had an elderly man say, “Can I join the reserves” the other day? And I said, you know, I don't know. I will find out for you. But it's just a reflection of the way that people want to serve their country and they want to serve each other. And the last thing I'll say is we have these, as you know, the major projects office. So there are a number of large projects across the country—more to come—that are being supported for an accelerated approval process and accelerated support for putting together the financing for these major projects. And that's driving a real need for that skills training, and we will need construction workers like never before.

This is going to be challenging. We're going to have to reorient ourselves in terms of how we envision the trades. And my youngest son is a tradesperson. When I think about the trades, these really are the builders of our community, and they really are the front line of Build Canada Strong and the sovereignty work that we're all doing together. But I am optimistic because Canadians want to help and they want to know how to help. And we have an opportunity here as well as a threat. There's a threat, obviously, to our economy, to our sovereignty, to what the future looks like in terms of new technology. But the asset we have is our people. And our people are more determined than ever to pull together. And that is truly something that I think we all need to support at all levels.

**Noel:** Minister, thank you so much for your time today.

**Minister Hajdu:** It's been a wonderful chat. Thank you very much.

**Jeremy:** As the Minister said, our tradespersons will be the frontline workers to Build Canada Strong, and Canada is more determined than ever to make it happen—let's see how these ideas land in manufacturing and unpack how automation and AI are reshaping roles, and why making training strategic is key to productivity. JP Giroux is President of The Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium or EMC. It began nearly three decades ago in rural Ontario with 18 manufacturers coming together to collaborate, share knowledge, and solve operational, business, and workforce challenges through peer-to-peer learning. What started as a small regional network has expanded across Canada and now engages more than 18,000 companies through local, regional, and provincial consortia. JP, welcome to the podcast.

**JP Giroux:** Thank you, Jeremy, for the invite. Thank you very much.

**Jeremy:** 2026 is already proving to be a big test for the manufacturing sector and the Canadian economy around the big shifts in occupations and skills we're seeing. So I'd love to start there and hear your thoughts.

**J.P.:** In January 2025, we were in the market with the industry providing information sessions and looking at how we can actually support manufacturers. But we really believe that 2025 was a transition year with all the uncertainty that we have faced in the Canadian manufacturing sector. However, despite everything that happened in 2025, and we're constantly taking the pulse of manufacturing employers, generally speaking, the economy is doing relatively well. Some of the export sales are going slightly down or declining. However, inter-provincial trade is picking up. So all of this is coming pretty much on even. And the economy and the manufacturers are very resilient.

You're quite right, 2026 will be a real test for the manufacturers. And one of the things that we are actually seeing as changes, and I think a lot has to do with, in the last two, three years—there's been significant investment from manufacturers in new advanced manufacturing investment. So here we're talking about automation, we're talking about robotics, to a certain point, and this is the new kids on the block, the AI, but all, everything around digitalization has been at the forefront of manufacturers.

And so we are also seeing a shift in the infill vacancy. So about 40 per cent, and this is very much across all regions in Canada, there is labour shortages. However, the type of occupation has been shifting from new entry level to specialized workers. We basically attribute this to the recent investment in advanced manufacturing as well as skilled trades. Now with new technology, the skills are shifting into more maintenance and operational maintenance and technical training as well is on the upswing from that perspective.

**Jeremy:** That leads me a bit into my next question around automation's impact on smaller and medium enterprises in the sector. What do they need to keep up with the pace of transformation?

**JP:** This is a good point because with new robots, with new lines that are fully automated, with significant investment in digitalization, there's new skills that are required. However, the foundational skills are still very much part of the equation. So we like to dissect this at this level—so there's the essential skills, so very much like the human capability, if I can use that term, about [the] ability to talk, to read, to use documents, and the comprehension is very much at the essential skills level; but also ability to problem solve. And we've been investing significant effort to bring problem-solving techniques and skills, especially working with small and medium-sized companies. With this comes everything around digital. Now we touch on new advanced manufacturing. Now that brings also the ability to function with the new technology. And I spoke about the maintenance piece around skills trade as well that touched on technical skills like PLCs [programmable logic controllers], that touch on electricity, millwrighting, and welding. Quite often now, we see in small companies—like I was in BC a few weeks ago, at a small company with a robot, a welding robot called Bob. So now, the minute that you introduce a robot in an environment, that's also changed the culture.

One central skill is the ability for the workers and the employers to constantly invest in learning. So this is what we call the continuous learning spirit. And we're constantly animating and facilitating conversations with employers to provide them tools with resources to encourage a continuous learning philosophy in their own workplace.

**Jeremy:** I like the way you're phrasing continuous learning as a cycle, and I'd like to pivot on that. And how continuous learning as a potential strategic investment can be translated into what's on everyone's mind now, which is productivity. So what in your mind does effective training investment look like for manufacturers today?

**JP:** We've been monitoring the investment of manufacturing employers in training for decades at EMC. And as you mentioned, there's a direct link between, and it's very well documented: With strategic investment in skills development, there will be productivity gains. So we're bringing this to the attention of the employers, particularly small and medium size. We also know that when we start comparing ourselves with the US or the

European, to a certain point, the Asian market as well, we invest less in training and skills development. So this is an area where Canada has to do much better. And to your point about the training effectiveness, and we really believe in the area of training, it's very important to move it right now. And a lot of the training investment or interventions are very tactical. They're not strategic. So we would always try to bring this to attention to employers, like how [can you] bring your training intervention into a strategic intervention. So meaning like how this could affect your bottom line, how this could be actually addressing a business issue. Like you talked about productivity, you talk about downtime, you can talk about how to streamline your operation and be more productive as an environment. So for us, that's top of mind.

The way we do this is we like to contextualize training and we like to bring applications, so business applications with a specific project in mind or an area where we are trying to solve a real issue in the workplace. So now tying this to skills development and theory, but bringing real applications. So companies, when they get involved with EMC and our training methodology, it's very much part of how we can actually not only solve a problem, but also assess the business impact and the learning impact of the problem that was solved through that training intervention. So this is a way for us to get the attention of employers on how to invest more, bring actual real workplace results in true training intervention, and actually tackle also everything that is in the intangible. So here we're talking about the employees and how they can become more confident in their work, more engaged, and obviously boosting morale in the workplace.

**Jeremy:** JP, as a final question, what's one thing you think our listeners need to hear right now in this moment of change?

**JP:** Despite everything that's happening, and I think we will see more change and rapid change, disruption with new technology. We briefly talk about AI and the impact of AI in the workplace. That is so true with manufacturing. I think it's a great opportunity at all levels to express leadership and also our entrepreneurial spirit and how we can actually change things very rapidly too. So making decisions, so people that are at all levels, and here I'm talking about industry; employers. I'm also talking everybody in government, and surely we're seeing a lot of change in government as well. Educators, like lots of colleges and universities are facing severe disruption, as well as non-for-profits like EMC. And so here's an opportunity for us to show leadership and make a difference.

**Jeremy:** Wonderful. JP, thank you so much for joining me.

**JP:** Thank you very much.

**Jeremy:** We've heard how manufacturers can make training a strategic lever, and our final guest zoom out to a Canada-wide picture. Wendy Cukier is Professor of Entrepreneurship and Innovation and the Academic Director and Founder of the Diversity Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University. The institute leads action-oriented research and nationwide programs that advance equity, diversity, inclusion, and future-ready skills across Canada's workforce. Wendy joins us to explore how SMEs, inclusion, and hard-nosed scenario planning for AI should shape Canada's skills strategy for 2026 and beyond. Wendy, welcome. Thanks for being here.

**Wendy Cukier:** Great to be here.

**Jeremy:** Wendy, ahead of our conversation today, you told me we can't build Canada without a national skills agenda. And I wanted to ask you what that agenda looks like and why skills development is so central to Canada's long-term economic security and sovereignty.

**Wendy:** I think it goes without saying, you can't build anything without people. Even with physical AI, we still need humans in the loop. And if you think about the history of Canada, building has always depended on having people with the right skills at the right time. I think it is more urgent than ever to really make sure that our skill strategy is aligned with our national strategy because we are in the midst of disruption and crises that, frankly, I don't think we have ever experienced before. And if we don't have good alignment, if we can't be responsive, if we can't pivot, if we can't react, not just to national needs, but to regional or even local needs, I think we are going to fall behind. And it's important from my perspective to keep our eye on the ball. Certainly the Prime Minister has identified some key strategic areas: Energy, mining, transport, advanced manufacturing, housing, the care economy—as places that we need to invest. But remember also, they're all the high profile national projects that have been identified. And while many of them fall into those sectors, they're also often in rural and remote communities that do not have anything like the labour force that's required to execute on those projects. So I can't think of a single sector that we can dismiss or overlook when we're thinking about the skill strategy. We can't simply focus on the needs of the large corporations because Canada is a country of entrepreneurs and small-medium enterprises. Small-medium enterprises account for over 90 per cent of businesses in this country. And if they are not central to the discussion, we are really going to miss the boat.

**Jeremy:** Okay, you're saying SMEs should be core to Canada's skills agenda, but how do we make sure our strategy also reflects the full diversity of Canada's talent pool and the changing demographics of who's actually in the workforce?

**Wendy:** It's basically marketing 101. Look at the Canadian population. Women are half the population. We make 70 per cent of the purchasing decisions. People with disabilities now account for 27 per cent of the population. That's a massive increase, partly because of the aging of the boomers, like me, but also because our understanding of disability has expanded to include people with mental health or cognitive differences. Racialized people, 25 to 30 per cent. And even though we've slashed immigration, we need immigrants to make up for our demographic deficits, and we'll continue to, whether the levels are high or the levels are low. Persons who identify as 2SLGBT+ are a growing percentage of the population, but so are their allies. And when we think about the Indigenous population, again, it's a small per cent, but it's one of the most rapidly growing percentages of the population. So just add that together.

So for me, it's simple math. Look at the percentages of the population that are represented now by equity-deserving groups. You need a strategy to attract and retain Indigenous peoples and diverse people and women. You need a strategy to develop products and services to serve women, Indigenous peoples, other diverse segments of the population. And those two things are related because we know that lived experience provides insight. And very often, whether we're talking about healthcare or education or the development of consumer goods or the development of technology, if you have diverse teams, they're much more likely to be able to develop products and services to meet the needs of diverse populations. This is really

foundational to designing products, services, and being successful, not just domestically, but globally.

I know it's old, but diversity really is Canada's strength because think about it: We have so much diversity within our existing talent pools and our existing markets, it naturally equips us to serve diverse populations around the world. The majority of Canadians clearly believe that equity, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace is mostly a good thing. In fact, the people who think it's mostly a good thing outnumber the people who think it's mostly a bad thing by a factor of three to one. This is really core to Canada's values, but also, in my view, to our economic success and our global expansion and our self-sufficiency.

**Jeremy:** And if diversity strengthens Canada's talent pool, how do we make sure that same workforce is ready for the seismic disruption that AI is about to unleash?

**Wendy:** I literally cannot think of a job that is not potentially at risk. I mean, we're seeing with a lot of entry-level positions, entry-level computer science, entry-level service jobs in call centers, starting to be eroded. And while a lot of economists will say, "No, no, we're not seeing the evidence," I would argue that we are seeing companies redeploy people. So even if the overall net isn't showing the level of disruption we're observing on a small scale, it's happening. But when you look at the progress of agentic AI, when you look at the progress of physical AI, costs are a factor, certainly adoption is an issue, and so on. But literally, it is hard to imagine any job that could not be eliminated or at least made so much more efficient that we will not need as many people as we currently need.

The ways in which agentic AI can be used to, in effect, replace entire people by codifying their knowledge, by learning from experience, and replicating tasks that are done over and over, whether it's writing proposals, writing press releases, providing coaching and training and advice, and so on and so forth—the impact of that is so far beyond what we've seen with machine learning or generative AI, it's almost hard to imagine.

And then when we get to some of the applications of physical AI—we've just heard that one of the auto manufacturers is going to start replacing humans in Canada with robots. We thought things like trades wouldn't be affected until I spoke to a woman who runs a construction company that is now starting to use robots because labor is too expensive. I'm working on a project with public mobile robots where the principal application will be in long-term care. And we're not talking decades; we're literally talking years. So I believe it's important to hope for the best, but plan for the worst. And I do think that our old approaches to projecting the future based on the past simply don't apply anymore. And we really have to be prepared to adopt scenario planning, contingency planning—highly adaptive and responsive approaches to everything that we do.

And we can do it. We showed during COVID that when put under pressure, Canadians can do things in days that historically took them years. We can move, we can adapt, and we can pivot, but we need to have the mindset to prepare ourselves for what I think is going to be far more disruptive than anybody expects.

**Jeremy:** Wendy, thank you so much for joining me on the Future Skills Podcast. It's been great talking with you.

**Wendy:** Thanks for having me. I've really enjoyed it.

**Jeremy:** In this episode, we explored how policy, industry, and research leaders are navigating Canada's evolving skills landscape. These conversations highlight the urgency and opportunity of preparing for what we're up against. As all of our guests have said, it's the people that matter most—our human judgement, capability, and determination—that are going to get us through. I'd like to thank my guests Noel Baldwin of the Future Skills Centre, the Honourable Patty Hajdu, JP Giroux of EMC, and Wendy Cukier of the Diversity Institute.

You can hear all six seasons of the Future Skills Podcast on your favorite podcast app. Give us a follow if you haven't, and stay tuned for the rest of the season. This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Jeremy Strachan. Sound design also by yours truly. Thanks for listening.

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