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Summary Report
of a Consultation Workshop on:
**Critical Skills in
Strategic Industry
Sectors of the
Canadian Economy**

The Prairies – in Winnipeg
May 27th and 28th, 1999

Secretariat of the Expert Panel on Skills

Canada

**SUMMARY REPORT OF
A CONSULTATION WORKSHOP ON:**

**CRITICAL SKILLS
IN STRATEGIC INDUSTRY SECTORS
OF THE CANADIAN ECONOMY**

**THE PRAIRIES – in WINNIPEG
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DEFINING THE ISSUES

Panel member Sheryl Feller welcomed participants, pointing out that the Expert Panel had a unique opportunity to influence public policy. Panel member André Bazergui added that the main purpose of the consultation workshops was to gather the views and ideas of knowledgeable people with personal experience in different aspects of the skills challenge.

Participants broke into small groups for a short brainstorming exercise aimed at identifying issues and opportunities in the five industry sectors under study, as well as those in the Canadian society and economy in general. Here are some of the key points raised:

- It is critical to develop a **learning culture** and “learning” organizations in Canada, thereby creating an environment where people are challenged to become well educated and acquire essential skills such as learning skills and problem-solving skills
- **Partnerships** should be developed that involve all the stakeholders
- The **labour pool** must be expanded, to include marginalized groups, Aboriginal people, and new immigrants
- Need to ensuring that public policies and initiatives take into account the **Prairie perspective** and its unique economic, political and social environment
- Important to establish a **monitoring process** or machinery whereby as a nation, we can identify what skills are needed, how training is provided, and what the outcomes are
- We need to make sure that **our education and training systems are in step** with the broad directions taken by our economy and society
- We should try and look carefully into the “brain drain” issue and insure that we **create the conditions for a “brain gain”**
- We need to address the shortage of managers who know technology

These issues and others were regrouped under a number of themes. These were discussed in small groups, with a view to develop recommendations for action. Hereafter is a summary of the main conclusions as reported in plenary.

LABOUR FORCE DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

The group examined two main areas: communication between and among industry, government and educational institutions, and ways of responding to change.

Recommendations for Action

- Establish, support and maintain “industry action groups” (sectoral human resource councils) at both the national and provincial levels; funding should be shared between all stakeholders; their core mandate should be to address skills needs and development, and encourage structural change within institutions that provide training and education.
- Increase the flexibility of the workforce by “bundling” skills rather than train for very specific skills; technical skills training should also include essential skills training.
- Make greater use of internship programs.
- Expand the use “Previous Learning Assessment and Recognition”, to give people credit for what they already know.
- Conduct regular and systematic analyses of skills requirements and skills gaps as a basis for estimating future training needs.
- In industry sectors where the business cycle has regular “peaks and valleys”, set resources aside during peak periods in preparation for future training needs (training trust funds, individual training savings funds); when activities slow down, minimize lay-offs by using work sharing, and take advantage of idle equipment and facilities to prepare workers for the next upswing.

Key Messages

- It is imperative that industry, government and educational institutions work together.
- We should make sure that plans for action include all Canadians, particularly those at risk or disadvantaged.
- We need to become much better at identifying the skills that will be needed in the future and at predicting changes in the composition and characteristics of the work force.

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITIES

Recommendations for Action

- To create opportunities, we need to invest massively in technology; we also need to develop a culture of entrepreneurship, risk-taking and partnering

Many funding programs (e.g., for R&D, for industrial development, or employability development) should be much more tolerant to risk and should not be so overly concerned with short term gains.

- People (particularly young people) should be educated on the importance of entrepreneurship and risk-taking in the creation of wealth
- SMEs need help in developing their capacity to market ideas and products.
- Aggressive measures should be taken to eliminate inter-provincial barriers that limit the movement of intellectual capacity and skills throughout the country
- Means should be found to make sure that highly skilled new immigrants are not prevented from working in their field; measures should be taken by governments to make the key players more clearly accountable for their actions, particularly Immigration authorities, licensing bodies and post-secondary institutions; contributions from professional organizations like the Association of Engineers or the Canadian Council of Technicians and Technologists should be sought out in this regard.

Key Messages

- Existing partnership models should play a larger role in the activities of individuals and businesses, including in particular the sector councils .
- We must become better at sharing “best practices”.
- Canadians should be proud of what they do well and should not shy away from self-promotion, as individuals and as a nation.

HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

The group focussed on smaller companies where, in their view, occurs the bulk of business activities related to human resource development and planning.

Recommendations for Action

- The main goals should be: 1) a greater commitment to HR planning and development in SMEs; 2) better dissemination and sharing of innovations and best practices; and 3) a much better fit between the education and training programs of PSE institutions and the skills requirements in industry.
- Measures to improve support services to small firms, which could include, for example: the creation of centralized business services under the aegis of sector councils; the provision of HR-related information by existing business resources centres; and initiatives to increase the number of business consultants with expertise in SME issues.
- Through sectoral human resources councils, develop partnerships to allow for sectoral training with like companies
- Considering that human resources development constitute a strategic business advantage, introduce legislated incentives to help increase firms' investments in training.
- It should be standard practice for post-secondary institutions to establish industry advisory bodies.

Key Messages

- Human resource development has to become a priority for small firms; HR development is too often forgotten altogether or sacrificed first whenever the cash flow become tight.
- Small business leaders could serve as champions and models for best practices.
- Education and training institutions should become able to respond much more quickly to the changing skill needs of industry.

EDUCATION

The group was particularly concerned with funding, with the needs of vulnerable groups, and with the quality of the teaching personnel.

Recommendations for Action

- Provide adequate funding of post-secondary education, including salaries high enough to attract and keep the best and the brightest in the teaching profession.
- Within the education system, improve human resource planning and professional development
- Revamp the system of teacher certification in order to align teacher training with today's realities and allow easier access to the profession for people from other career tracks (e.g., industry)
- Provide career choice information to students and parents, all along K-12.
- Make much greater use of mentorship, co-op and internship programs.
- Provide adequate resources to combat learning difficulties, particularly in math.
- Ensure that there is adequate support for Aboriginal students.
- At the high school level, ensure that teachers are teaching only those subjects in which they trained as experts, and use work placements.

Key Messages

- There are many conflicting views on whether or not the education system is responding quickly enough to industry needs.
- There is a need for much greater accountability throughout the education system, from kindergarten to PSE, particularly in terms of educational outcomes.
- Income disparities – especially as they seem to be widening – are a fundamental root problem that should be addressed as such; children living in poverty do not have equal access to learning; the impact of early learning deficits risks being felt for a life time.

CAREER AWARENESS

Recommendations for Action

- The career planning process should begin in elementary school; parents should also be educated with regard to career options.
- Career counselling should be improved and standards and certification introduced in the career counselling field.
- Industry should become more involved, for example by participating in career fairs, by working jointly with high schools (e.g., through mentoring), by providing their own employees with better information of a firm's future skills needs
- Expand the use of Internet for disseminating career information, making sure the information is accurate, complete and well written

Key Messages

- Career information is required in many different situations: young people in school from primary school to college and university, people seeking to re-enter the work force, people wishing to make a career change, etc.
- More often than not, young people make critical career decisions without much information on occupations and industries, let alone on how the skills learned in school could be used in the workplace.

PARTNERSHIPS

Recommendations for Action

- A permanent national body to monitor skill needs should be established immediately; such an organization should:
 1. be made up of national and regional sectoral councils with stakeholder representation
 2. have the authority to make decisions and direct funding to various institutions
 3. identify transferable skills that are common to different industry sectors

4. facilitate and support small scale, local partnerships in order to ensure the participation of SMEs as well as co-operation between small and large firms in a given sector.
 5. have representation from Aboriginal groups
 6. be funded by its participants
- Industry and education should work more closely together, for example by setting up industry advisory committees for educational programs, establishing exchange programs between school and industry, setting up industry speakers programs and industry open house events, etc.; tax incentives could be offered to firms willing to participate in such activities
 - Measures should be taken so that reliable standards and quality insurance exist for all training programs – particularly those offered by private vocational institutions.

Key Messages

- What is needed urgently is a machinery at national level to insure co-operative planning among all stakeholders
- Linkages are too weak between industry and education, particularly at the high school and university levels
- It is common to see extremely low graduation rates in university level programs (e.g., computer science), which represents a tremendous waste of resources and would suggest that career information is woefully inadequate.

IMMIGRATION

Recommendations for Action

- Set up a public inquiry to clarify the respective roles of PSE institutions, licensing bodies and the immigration system, and propose a more effective and accountable process for the selection of immigrants and the assessment and recognition of their qualifications.
- Generalize the use Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, to make sure immigrants are treated fairly and that as a country, we do not waste valuable human resources.

- Improve the availability and quality of resources to help immigrants meet realistic language requirements (too often, the courses offered are too basic and do not prepare people well for the work place, especially in a technically rich environment).
- Benchmark skills requirements as well as the necessary training or up-grading, and make this information easily available to immigrants, so that they can understand clearly where they stand in the Canadian labour market.

Key Messages

- When it comes to economic immigrants, we have a syndrome of “seduction and abandonment”: we like to attract skilled people here, but when they do come, we put them through all kinds of unreasonable barriers.
- Professional licensing bodies should be subjected to a much more rigorous and transparent accountability regime.
- Cultural differences and an insufficient command of English (or French) can make employers reluctant to employ immigrants, especially in highly technical jobs involving team work; ways should be found to overcome such difficulties.

Overall Key Messages from the Participants in the Prairies Consultation Workshop to the Members of the Expert Panel on Skills:

- Pay attention to Aboriginal issues.
- Be fully aware of the difference between small- and large-sized companies.
- Jurisdictional issues must be resolved.

APPENDIX I: Participants

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