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

Ontario – in Toronto
May 3rd and 4th, 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**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DEFINING THE ISSUES

Panel member John McLennan stressed that “the issue is much larger than skills, encompassing investments and opportunities and, ultimately, keeping pace in a world that is changing more rapidly and profoundly than ever before.”

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:

- A constantly changing work environment demands “**soft skills**”: literacy, learning, business, communication, second language and interpersonal skills and technical aptitude – and continuous skills upgrading.
- In order to meet the needs of industry, the education process needs to be restructured to **take advantage of new technologies** like the Internet and freed from regulatory constraints that prevent institutions from responding quickly to change; collaboration between industry, government and educators should be encouraged.
- Skill sets must be identified, and **generic foundational skills** differentiated from specific technical skills; strategies for “mobile” skills and knowledge must be developed; the experience of other countries should be examined
- More investment to enhance our ability to **forecast skills requirements** is needed, especially as a wave of “baby boomer” retirements is about to create an unprecedented number of new openings.
- **Education and skills development information** must be provided both to students and employees
- **Continuing education opportunities** must be improved, especially as related to job-specific skills development
- Education should be viewed as an economic, rather than a social, program; opportunities for retraining are very limited; **re-investment in human capital** is too low and tax incentives could be used to increase private sector investment in training and re-training
- Community colleges are often out of touch with industry and need to **align education and training programs with the marketplace** more effectively; institutions must try their best to see into the future, anticipate the needs of industry and provide a better balance between generic and specific technical skills

- **High labour mobility** creates options for employers and opportunities for workers
- There is an **over-emphasis on university education**: considering that only 20% will graduate from university; the majority who do not are the core of the workforce
- **Applied research in non-university environments** needs to be encouraged, which requires changes to legislation and encouragement of business partnering with colleges
- The constant flow of immigrants and emigrants makes it necessary to improve our system and methods for **prior learning assessment and recognition**

These issues were regrouped under seven general headings and further discussed in small groups. Hereafter is a summary of their main conclusions as reported in plenary.

MOBILITY OF LABOUR

Mobility was essential if Canada is to remain competitive globally: "It is essential that we can get the right people with the right skills at the right place at the right time."

- The movement of skills into Canada requires the **elimination of barriers to immigration and emigration**; inter-provincial mobility is also important and necessitates the removal of non-tariff trade barriers within the country and the development of uniform accreditation systems
- **Cross-industry mobility** is also crucial; the need for "learning adaptation" was stressed, as well as the responsibility of industry to take those with general training and provide them with industry-specific skills
- Federal, provincial and territorial partnerships with business and industry must be developed and maintained in order to allow accurate **forecasting of needs** and assessments of the education system, which would allow the creation of a database of "general underlying skills, as well as those unique to specific industry sectors."
- Participants also stressed the need to provide an education which, in addition to specific technical content, creates a **capacity to learn**, which is the foundation for lifelong learning

FORECASTING

The accelerating speed of technological change is in turn creating a need to constantly acquire new skills; traditional “career environments” are being radically challenged; industry’s inability to identify its own human resources requirements – present and future – makes it virtually impossible for educators and trainers to anticipate future skills needs

- It is necessary to “get the government’s attention” because we **lack a national vision** in addressing opportunities in a globalized, integrated world; this is clearly a responsibility of the federal government
- A balance between “hard” and “soft” skills are needed for adaptable workforce.
- Labour market information must be consolidated and widely disseminated; a user-friendly data base should be established and made available to educators and trainers at all levels; it is important to develop a common language between educators and the workplace
- Care must be taken to focus on information that is valuable and reliable; inter-jurisdictional “jostling” between government agencies for control over specific issues tends to compromise the reliability of data

EDUCATION PROGRAMS

We need to develop a vision of the future of education, both at the provincial and national levels.

- Developing educator and employer partnerships in order to expose students to the “employment experience”
- Recognizing employability skills, while creating a balance between generic and specific technical skills.
- Supporting demonstration projects that assess programs related to skills needs assessment and delivery
- Supporting the implementation of successful demonstration projects
- Creating an “innovations culture” which supports and rewards excellence and entrepreneurship
- Supporting apprenticeships and hands-on training programs.

Participants were especially convinced of the need to better support apprenticeship-type programs; it was pointed out that this is an area in which the Federal government could intervene quickly and without involving itself in “jurisdictional wrangling” with the provinces and territories.

PARTNERSHIPS

- The Federal government must maintain a facilitator role in partnership with provincial and territorial governments to ensure that we remain competitive.
- There is a need for more and better collaboration between industry, government and education to compile and distribute data; specifically, skills requirements must be determined sector by sector using a standardized methodology.
- Industry, government and education should partner to communicate better with K-12 students and parents about which skills, jobs and career paths are in demand and likely to be more in demand in the future; the fact that most schools are now “on-line” should make this much easier
- To promote success stories around clustering and partnerships, a national symposium should focus on best practices and “celebrate our successes around partnering”
- Government should offer incentives to organizations (businesses and training/educational institutions) that participate in partnerships
- The “sectoral model” for partnerships should be re-examined and consensus reached with each sector, with an awareness that efforts in some sectors have not been successful.
- The groups’ most important message was: “Just do it!”

EDUCATION SYSTEM and STRUCTURES

(All of the following recommendations are aimed at the federal government.)

- Education systems (including apprenticeships) require the mobility of credit from university to college to real life; there must, therefore, be some kind of codified approach to Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

- The government should use a “heavy hand,” to remove barriers and to promote the adoption of shared standards for PLAR
- A “skills passport” could be instituted which would allow the holder to travel anywhere within the country and gain entry into academic programs, while also being used as a “qualifications summary”
- We need to depend less on academic “credentialism” and find better ways to determine people’s skills, while acknowledging “alternate” educational paths
- Tax credits should be implemented to promote lifelong learning
- Because education is an economic, as well as a social, program we should encourage a paradigm shift that promotes education as a strategic economic investment.
- The need to develop new modes for delivering education is urgent, so tax incentives should be used to promote such policies as individual released time from work, the development of distance learning and other modes of alternative education

RESOURCES

The following recommendations were made in light of a number of key assumptions: that government should provide full funding for a fully-accessible K-12 education system, that company-specific training should be the responsibility of the firm and, that whoever assumes the benefit of training should pay for it. However, there was some strong disagreement within the group on this last point, as some members supported zero-tuition and open access to all education and training.

- Most members of this group agreed upon a (schematic) model for “creating an education culture for innovation and prosperity”; that model – in the form of a virtuous circle – proposes that for a given fixed population: investments in Education can lead to Better Jobs, which in turn lead to Full(er) Employment, to Larger Tax Base, to Lower Tax Rate, to further investments in Education, etc.
- The group stressed that industry needs to back up their skills requirements forecasts with training investment dollars
- Tuition fee levels should be based on the earning potential in any given field and loans or bursaries should be made available to those who cannot afford the increased tuition fees
- The Employment Insurance surplus could be used to support training for the unemployed or likely-to-be unemployed

APPENDIX I: PARTICIPANTS

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