

# Future of Work | A literature review

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapidly shifting environment of the workforce has been a topic under much consideration for years leading up to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the introduction of COVID-19 at the end of 2019, the difficulties that youth were facing in entering or progressing in the workforce became exasperated and challenged our understanding and expectations for the future of work in our communities moving forward (Youthful Cities 2021). Youth are Canada's most valuable asset when it comes to facing the future of work (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). A large part of Canada's success in navigating what's to come will depend on how well the next generation of Canadians are integrated into the workforce (ibid).

If youth are to realize their full potential in this changing landscape, youth as well as employers, policy makers and educators will need to innovate and adapt current practices to meet the needs of the shifting future (ibid).

To help provide insights, this literature review will highlight five key trends that emerged out of available literature on the topic of 'future of work'.

## Future of Work: The Top 5 Trends Affecting Youth

### 1. Bridging the Gap from Education to Employment

Considering the complex skillset required for the jobs of the future, it is widely agreed upon that formal education alone is not enough to equip youth with all they need to enter and thrive in the workforce (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). While many youth graduating possess a number of relevant hard skills to apply to a job opening, they often lack the experience and 'soft skills' that employers are looking for (ibid). In a report published by McKinsey & Company it is noted that even though 83% of Canadian education providers believe that youth are adequately prepared for the workforce, only 44% of youth and 34% of employers feel the same way (McKinsey & Company 2015). In addition, with automation replacing a wide range of the entry-level positions youth may have been traditionally hired for (and the pandemic limiting the number of face-to-face jobs available) youth are facing a gap in job opportunities that they are sufficiently qualified for (ibid). In Canada, 40% of post-secondary graduates take more than three months to get hired for their first job, and one in ten take longer than a year (McKinsey & Company 2015).

When it comes to the issue of accessing the future of work, it's important to note that the experience of youth across Canada is felt differently by different segments of the population (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). According to the McKinsey & Company report aforementioned, of the youth surveyed who identified as a visible minority, 40% had a university degree (compared to 28% of the rest of the sample) and yet the unemployment rate for this group was 10%, double that of their peers (McKinsey & Company 2015). It was also reported that these youth had fewer paid internships (18% versus 26%) and took longer to find a job (ibid). When it comes to accessing the technology needed to compete with job demands, only 62% of Canadians in the lowest income quartile have access to the internet, compared with 95% of those in the highest (Kuruville 2021). This uneven access to information and communication technology for youth living in low-income communities has an effect on their ability to stay engaged in education, mentorship, employment and in their communities (Kuruville 2021).

Understanding the barriers youth face when bridging between education and employment will require collaboration across all sectors including governments, employers, private sector leaders, community organizations, and youth themselves (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). Youth will need more opportunities to gain work experience and develop 'soft skills'; access to guidance and mentorship; the removal of financial barriers to accessing digital skills training and higher education; and a workforce that has inclusive and equitable hiring practices. Most importantly youth will need a voice in designing the systems and policy changes that meet their individual needs so that they can be successful in participating in the ever-changing future of work that is upon us (Kuruville 2021).

## 2. Re-Skilling and Up-Skilling for the Future

Taking into consideration the major technological advances fueling the future of work – including the move to virtual work, AI, and automation – the need for the workforce to re-skill to meet the demands of the market is essential (Whiting 2020; Fraser 2021; Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report, 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025, as adoption of technology increases, and 85 million jobs may be displaced by a shift in the division of labour between humans and machines (Whiting 2020). That being said, it also notes that 97 million new jobs may be created that are more adapted to the new division of labour between humans, machines and algorithms (ibid).

As youth think about entering the job market, becoming aware of the skills in demand will be paramount to their success in attaining and maintaining a successful career. There is much in the literature around the types of jobs that will be available in the future, as well as jobs that are becoming replaced due to technological advancement (See Appendix A for a snapshot pulled from the World Economic Forum's Future of Work Report). According to data from LinkedIn and Coursera, skills in high demand for emerging professions include sales and marketing, content writing, product development, AI skills, cloud computing, engine digital marketing, and human computer interaction (Whiting 2020).

In addition to upskilling ones technical or 'hard skills', mastering 'soft skills', or 'power skills' is becoming crucial to adapt to the changing landscape that the future of work brings (Fraser 2021; Blair et al, 2019; Lau 2021). As more job tasks are becoming automated, soft skills that can't be replicated by machines have become more important. According to a report by Deloitte in 2017, "soft skill-intensive

occupations will account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030” and hiring employees with more soft skills could increase a business’s revenue by more than

\$90,000 (Lau 2021). A survey of 90 large Canadian private-sector employers in 2016 reported teamwork, communication, and problem-solving capabilities as some of the most essential skills for entry-level positions (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). Skills like empathy, emotional intelligence, kindness, mindfulness, adaptability, integrity, optimism, self-motivation, grit and resilience will serve workers in coping with the disruptive changes and shifts in labour-market demands (ibid). As Zabeen Hirji, executive advisor on the future of work at Deloitte, states – “they’re future-proof” (Fraser 2021).

### 3. Destigmatizing Mental Health in the Workplace

Over 200 million workdays are lost due to mental health conditions every year and yet it is a topic that is still largely not talked about in the workplace (Greenwood et al. 2019). According to studies done in the United States, nearly 60% of employees have never spoken to anyone at work about their mental health status and one-third of people with a mental illness get the treatment they need (Greenwood et al. 2019; Aarons-Mele 2018). Failing to address an

employee’s mental health can not only hinder an employee’s productivity and professional relationships but can have significant impacts on a company’s bottom line – according to the

CDC, \$17-\$44 billion is lost to depression each year, whereas \$4 is returned to the economy for every \$1 spent caring for people with mental health issues (Aarons-Mele 2018).

With the challenges of COVID-19 and the shift to working from home, the importance of addressing mental health in the workplace is more important than ever. Employees want to work at a company whose culture supports mental health – this is especially true for youth.

In the Deloitte Global 2020 Millennial Survey, mental health was found to be one of the most- requested benefits employees are longing for and nearly half of Millennials and Gen Z’ers around the world ranked mental health as their first or second priority (Codd 2020).

In a study conducted on the prevalence of mental health challenges and stigma in the United States workplaces, less than half of respondents felt that mental health was prioritized at their company, and even fewer viewed their company leaders as advocates (Greenwood et al 2019). The study identified that the most desired workplace resources for mental health were a more open and accepting culture, training, and clearer information about where to go or who to ask for support (ibid). Research has found that feeling authentic and open at work leads to improved performance, engagement, employee retention, and overall wellbeing. (Aarons-Mele 2018; Van Ralph Den 2013).

While one’s position within a company showed no impact on who struggled with mental health and who didn’t, demographics did. Millennials and Gen Zers were more likely to experience mental health symptoms for longer durations and further were more open to diagnosis, treatment, and talking about them in the workplace (Greenwood 2019). Half of Millennials and 75% of Gen Zers had left jobs in the past for mental health reasons, compared with 34% of respondents overall (ibid). These findings acknowledge a shift in awareness and openness that younger generations are bringing to the workplace.

Companies that want to improve the state of mental health at work, especially for a younger, more diverse workforce, need to update their strategies (ibid). That being said, it's also important for young employees to become accountable and take steps in their work to nurture their own mental health – including taking care of one's self; disconnecting when you can; speaking up about mental health concerns; and, building a meaningful support network (Codd 2020).

#### 4. The Move to Remote and Hybrid Places

While remote work was already a trend more and more workplaces were starting to consider pre-pandemic, COVID-19 substantially increased the number of people working from home due to lockdowns and public health measures (Statistics Canada 2021). Before the pandemic, 82% of Canadian employees worked primarily from an external workplace, today, that's down to 27% — with 59% now working remotely (PwC 2020). Growing research suggests remote work, at least in part, is here to stay; with the 'hybrid' work model suggested to be the most likely approach businesses will take as we transition out of the pandemic (Lindores 2021; The Economist 2021; PwC 2020). A hybrid workplace is, "a flexible workplace model that is designed to support a distributed workforce of both in-office and remote workers (Voltage Control 2021)."

According to a PwC survey conducted in 2020, the top three challenges Canadian employees faced when it came to working from home were dealing with work-life balance (especially for households with kids), maintaining productivity and communicating with co-workers without traditional in-person interactions (PwC 2020). In the same survey, employers noted maintaining morale and company culture, adjusting to changing customer needs, and connectivity in a virtual work environment as their top three challenges (ibid). While more Canadians than ever want to work from home, these desires differ depending on the geography (employees in Ontario and Quebec have a greater preference for remote work than workers in Alberta and Atlantic Canada) and industry (with financial services, tech and government workers wanting to work remotely more than workers in manufacturing, health care and not-for-profits) (ibid).

When looking at youth trying to enter the job market, without the opportunity to build strong social and professional networks face-to-face they are at risk of feeling alienated in a remote work environment (Mull 2020). However, in a survey done by a European Student Think Tank, 86% of youth surveyed expressed a positive or very positive opinion of blended working; 52% already felt comfortable about working remotely; and 82% responded that it was more of an opportunity than an issue (Lazzarin 2021). This data shows that while there will be drawbacks for youth working remotely, there will also be opportunities that youth can leverage – including the flexibility to live where they want to, their comfort level with technology, and the potential for work-life balance – if given the chance to do so.

The literature overwhelmingly agrees that virtual work is here to stay. The future workforce and the companies that employ them must ensure they have the necessary tools, workforce structure and skills in place to be successful in the increasingly digital future (PwC 2020).

#### 5. The Rise of the Gig Economy

The gig economy can be characterized as an informal labour market that is made up of temporary, short-term or contract work (Senett 2021). Rather than work full-time for one employer, gig workers or

freelancers are independent contractors and can enter multiple contracts with a number of firms or individuals at a time (ibid).

The rise of the gig economy is a trend that began pre-COVID but, like the trends already mentioned, has accelerated due to the impacts of the pandemic. While it is difficult to get reliable data on the gig economy due to the informal nature of the work, the number of people freelancing is increasing, as is the number of people who are doing so full-time (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). According to a Bank of Canada survey published in 2019 up to 58% of youth aged 17-24 are participating in some form of informal work, nearly double the 30% of Canadians in general (Senett 2021). In a report published by Upwork, the world's largest remote talent platform, they found that 12% of the U.S. workforce started freelancing for the first time during the pandemic and 47% of hiring managers are more likely to hire freelancers (Wyman 2020; Jarrett 2021).

The gig economy is being experienced differently by different workers depending on the skillset they have to offer (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). Individuals with highly specialized, in-demand skills can take on a diverse array of high-paying jobs while having the autonomy to structure their work arrangements to suit their needs (ibid). Whereas for lower-skilled workers, gig work can mean temporary, contract or on-call work with lower wages and a lack of benefits and security (ibid).

For youth, the gig economy may just be the new normal (ibid). While it can offer flexibility, independence and job experience that could in turn lead to a transition into full-time employment, it can also bring with it increased uncertainty and working without benefits like extended health benefits, insurance or vacation pay (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017; Jeon 2019). That being said, as mentioned in Section 2: Re-Skilling and Up-Skilling for the Future, the skills youth will need in the future are beyond technical, but are related to one's ability to navigate uncertainty and adjust rapidly (Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship 2017). Gig workers must harness entrepreneurial skills that will be extremely valuable as work conditions continue to evolve. Research suggests that entrepreneurs score above average in areas of persuasion, leadership, personal accountability, goal orientation and interpersonal interaction (Bonnstetter 2012). Research further suggests that founders, compared to non-founder business leaders, are stronger at identifying opportunities, are more comfortable with uncertainty, and have better vision and influence (HBS Working Knowledge 2016). These skills will be important to weather the storm of the future of work and are something to be considered when weighing out the pros and cons.

## Appendix A



# Job landscape

By 2025, new jobs will emerge and others will be displaced by a shift in the division of labour between humans and machines, affecting:

**97 million**



**85 million**

### Growing job demand:

1. Data Analysts and Scientists
2. AI and Machine Learning Specialists
3. Big Data Specialists
4. Digital Marketing and Strategy Specialists
5. Process Automation Specialists
6. Business Development Professionals
7. Digital Transformation Specialists
8. Information Security Analysts
9. Software and Applications Developers
10. Internet of Things Specialists

### Decreasing job demand:

1. Data Entry Clerks
2. Administrative and Executive Secretaries
3. Accounting, Bookkeeping and Payroll Clerks
4. Accountants and Auditors
5. Assembly and Factory Workers
6. Business Services and Administration Managers
7. Client Information and Customer Service Workers
8. General and Operations Managers
9. Mechanics and Machinery Repairers
10. Material-Recording and Stock-Keeping Clerks

Source: Future of Jobs Report 2020, World Economic Forum.



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