



Submission by the *Canadian Labour and Business Centre* to the Innovation Engagement Strategy

Introduction

The *Canadian Labour and Business Centre* (CLBC) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the *Innovation Engagement Strategy*. We strongly agree with the Government of Canada that Canada must become a world leader in innovation, and we have a number of views and specific suggestions which we feel will contribute to that objective.

As a joint labour/management organization with a primary focus on labour market and skills issues, the CLBC is particularly well placed to comment on Challenge 2 of the Innovation Strategy: 'Developing Skills for the New Economy'. In so doing, we will follow the order of the six Discussion Questions as they appear on the Innovation Strategy website.

Developing Skills for the New Economy: Discussion Questions

1. Targets

The targets identified in *Achieving Excellence* are very important, but they will not by themselves ensure that Canada has a skilled work force. The targets in *Achieving Excellence* together with those in *Knowledge Matters*, capture the key dimensions of the broad skills issue.

2. Major Challenges

Skills issues are of central, and continuing, importance to Canadian labour and management leaders. In a survey of these Canadian leaders conducted in April 2002, the CLBC found that, out of 39 major issues facing Canada, skills shortages were ranked:

- Second in importance by public sector managers;
- Fourth in importance by private sector business leaders; and
- Ninth in importance by labour leaders in both the private and public sectors.

In addition, over half of all respondents, regardless of constituency, regarded skill shortages as a 'serious issue'. This proportion remained the same as in a similar survey undertaken in 2000, despite the recent much less buoyant economic conditions.

In our view, the major skills challenges facing Canada include, but go well beyond, those related to post-secondary education and recruitment of highly qualified individuals from abroad, which seem to be the central focus of *Achieving Excellence*. They also encompass the following:

- Addressing the implications of the demographic ‘crunch’ which Canada will increasingly face over the next decade;
- Improving elementary/secondary education outcomes in essential skills such as literacy, numeracy, and computer skills;
- Improving the school-to-work transition of young workers;
- Increasing apprenticeship registrations and completions;
- Improving the educational attainments of aboriginal youth, and their integration into the labour market (and the strengthening of aboriginal communities which would inevitably follow);
- Increasing foreign recruitment of highly skilled individuals including tradespersons;
- Increasing the hiring of visible minorities and the disabled, as well as women and men in non-traditional occupations;
- Increasing employer-based training;
- Increasing adult literacy levels;
- Removing barriers to interprovincial worker mobility;
- Improving our capacity to recognize the credentials, whether paper-based or experience-based, of both immigrants and Canadians.

In all of the above, business and labour leaders are increasingly looking for action rather than more consultation. In labour and business discussions conducted in 2001 by CLBC, the degree of frustration among representatives of both constituencies was palpable.¹ Both constituencies called for *national leadership* on the skills issue. To retain the support and involvement of these communities, therefore, governments will need to initiate a practical action plan which will produce demonstrable progress towards addressing skills issues.

Finally, many people we have consulted on the subject of skills shortages point to the fact that a variety of ‘silos’ of responsibility exist across and between governments, business, labour, education and other stakeholders. This situation increases the risk that stakeholders will ‘reinvent the wheel’ in their efforts to develop and implement new skills initiatives which in turn is delaying overall progress in developing a practical and coordinated approach to the skills issue.

“We can, and must, do more, together.”²

In our view, the key challenge is for governments, business, labour, educators, and other stakeholders to address the skills issue collaboratively. This, however, remains one of our greatest challenges; our traditional practices have not been marked by strong partnerships in the area of skills and learning, although in the last fifteen years such partnerships have been fostered at the sectoral level through the sector councils.

¹ Canadian Labour and Business Centre, Make Skills a National Priority, Ottawa, September 2001

² Knowledge Matters, page 6.

3. Government of Canada Priorities

The Government of Canada priorities cited in *Achieving Excellence*, together with those put forward in *Knowledge Matters*, will begin to address the wide array of specific skills challenges listed in Section 2.

In the view of CLBC, however, the most important priority for the Government of Canada is to find a way to:

- take active leadership of the skills agenda; and
- bring about the collaboration of all skills stakeholders in a practical, visible way, on practical initiatives with demonstrable results.

Without action which encompasses both these aspects, the Government of Canada risks being sidelined as ‘chief cheerleader’.

4. Our Innovation Vision

As a joint labour/management organization with strong complementary representation from governments and education, the CLBC places a very high priority on collaboration in search of practical solutions.

Our Innovation Vision focuses on the creation and/or nurturing of partnerships among skills stakeholders which lead to practical action. These operate at two levels, as follows:

Sectoral level

- ***Further Support and Expansion of the Sector Council Community in Canada***

In promoting partnerships, the CLBC would first envision an increasingly strong, varied and dynamic *Sector Council* community in Canada. Approximately 26 Sector Councils, featuring business, labour, government and education, have been established to address human resources and skills issues in individual sectors of the Canadian economy. The 2001 Budget earmarked additional resources for supporting existing sector councils and creating new ones.

At a recent seminar on sector councils,³ stakeholders and other knowledgeable participants discussed the variety of the sector council community and the richness of sector council innovation in addressing sector-level skills issues. They also explored new human resources-related issues which the sector councils, adequately resourced, could undertake. The expansion and development of this community of partnerships is a key aspect of future practical action by the Government of Canada.

³ Partnerships That Work!, organized by the Canadian Labour and Business Centre on May 23, 2002

National level

- ***National on-line skills and learning portal;***
- ***National skills and learning mechanism or institute***

At the national level, CLBC envisions a strategic partnership which would seek to bridge, in a practical way the ‘silos’ of responsibility which exist across and between governments, business, labour, education and other stakeholders. While the intentions, goals and efforts of individual stakeholders are significant, the CLBC believes that much more can be accomplished on the skills issue if efforts were better coordinated. To that end, the CLBC views the ***development of a national on-line skills and learning portal*** - a forum to share information specific to the skills and learning agenda – as a potentially important catalyst to fostering the collaborative environment that is needed to address this pervasive issue.

Such a portal represents an opportunity for the Government of Canada to initiate a practical, collaborative undertaking from which all participants would benefit. A national on-line skills and learning portal would cut across the many organizational silos that currently exist around this issue. Regardless of jurisdiction, and building on the strengths of the many stakeholders that are part of this issue, the portal would focus on providing skills related information, and on aggregating diverse interests and responsibilities.

The primary function of the proposed skills and learning portal would be to address the need for greater sharing and dissemination of all types of information related to the skills issue amongst all interested stakeholders in Canada and even internationally. Such a portal could provide an on-line aggregating framework to stimulate issue coordination and collaborative policy development. As conceived, this tool would be an important undertaking for the following reasons:

- The *raison d’être* of the portal is to aggregate skills related information on one site by leveraging the information found in many different locations;
- The development of a portal would invite and support the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders;
- The portal provides a “single window” through which a wide variety of information could be accessed in an efficient and timely manner by individuals and stakeholder groups involved in the skills issue;
- A single purpose portal is a cost-efficient means of distributing information and communicating with users and other interested parties;
- The portal would serve as an on-line platform to raise the profile of the skills issue to a more main stream one. It would present an opportunity to summarize and re-purpose available research, making it more accessible for non-specialist audiences;
- A portal could act as a clearinghouse to allow the media to identify new resources and then access the groups involved;

- By aggregating information from a diverse range of domestic and international sources, a portal can support decision making by all stakeholders and interested parties;
- When creatively and effectively structured, a portal can serve as a forum for "virtual" collaboration and iterative organization. All stakeholders, even "competitors", can find ownership opportunities through a properly structured portal environment.

But the skills portal might be just the first step in an even wider national level collaboration. It might be seen, in fact, as an intermediate step towards the creation of a national mechanism, or institute, which would not only permit extensive information sharing, but would bring together representatives of the stakeholder constituencies themselves to assess, discuss and develop national level approaches to skills and learning issues. Such an entity, which has been discussed by the CLBC Board of Directors, would be independent of government but would include representatives from federal and provincial governments, business, labour, education and other stakeholders. Some have referred to this entity as a *national skills and learning institute*.

The CLBC Skills Vision, in short, includes the active promotion of working partnerships at several levels.

- At the sectoral level, via growth in the sector council community;
- At the national level, via the collaborative creation of an on-line skills and learning portal, which might lead to
- A national level non-governmental skills and learning mechanism or institute which would bring together all skills stakeholders.

5. Commitments, Actions, Time Lines

The CLBC has already submitted to HRDC a proposal to explore with stakeholder groups their appetite for information-sharing, and what information they might require, through a skills portal. CLBC has identified a substantial list of potential stakeholders who might reasonably be expected to benefit from a skills and learning portal. The list includes educators, research institutes, federal and provincial departments, business and labour organizations, immigrant and aboriginal organizations etc.

Under the proposal, CLBC would work with HRDC to identify up to 50 organizations from across the various stakeholder communities to ensure a fully representative sample for the consultation. In-person meetings would be sought where possible with each participating organization, and supplemented by telephone interviews. Our goals would include an assessment of the utility of a skills and learning portal, the potential measures of success and the willingness of stakeholders to actively contribute ideas, information and promotion of the initiative.

The CLBC has recently commissioned a feasibility study on the skills and learning portal concept that can provide a credible starting point for the proposed consultation. We have also generated a preliminary matrix that identifies potential stakeholders for such a portal, and considers information assets and needs.

If funded, the consultations regarding the skills and learning portal project described above would be completed by September 25, 2002.

As an independent supplement to the portal proposal, CLBC could also undertake a consultative project to explore the potential interest of stakeholders in a national multipartite skills mechanism or institute, as sketched above.

6. National Issues

On the one hand, many issues fall within provincial training or education jurisdictions, or within the purview of provincial professional regulatory bodies. On the other, throughout the 2001 CLBC consultations with labour and business, both constituencies stressed that skills must be a *national* priority.

In the view of CLBC, the means to reconcile these apparently competing realities lies with the Government of Canada taking proactive leadership on building partnerships among all constituencies to address skills issues. This would most effectively be done by developing an initiative which would benefit all parties and require the active participation of all parties.

In our view, the proposed skills portal and its potential expansion into the national skills mechanism or institute will permit the federal government to take a leadership role in building a skilled, adaptable and inclusive workforce for the future.

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