



An All-Access Learning System

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The Problem

Calgary, like many other cities, is facing revolutionary changes to how its people live, work, and learn. A city's proximity to natural resources is no longer the driver of its competitive advantage. Instead, a city's ability to attract, inspire, develop, and retain diverse talent is the greatest predictor of social and economic prosperity.

Calgary in the New Economy sets out an ambitious vision and a strategic framework to develop a future-proof, sustainable economy for our city. This plan recognizes that the prosperity of a community comes from its people. To deliver on this vision, we must unlock and help realize the potential of every Calgarian.

Paradoxically, Calgary faces both a skills surplus and skills deficit. The contention is that this paradox is rooted in a lack of alignment between the industry-specific skills employers demand and the skills Calgarians possess.

20%

Proportion of executive positions held by females in Calgary.

84%

of labour force growth in Canada during the 2010s was from immigration.

There is often tension between the requirement of technical skills and the need expressed by employers for soft skills such as problem-solving, digital literacy, and communication. In addition, systemic bias based on gender, ethnicity, age, and socio-economic capacity creates another significant barrier to meeting the skills demand of the future.

For example, in a 2020 study, though women represent 50 per cent of the population, only 20 per cent of board positions are held by women in Calgary. The lowest of the Canadian cities in the study, including Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Halifax, Hamilton, London, and Ottawa. Similarly, though 40 per cent of Calgary’s labour force are from racialized communities, they represent only 9 per cent of board positions. Moreover, research suggests an equally qualified racialized candidate must submit 50 per cent more resumes than non-racialized candidates to be invited for an interview. Together, these challenges suppress the potential of our existing labour market and the employers who depend on it.

These statistics suggest that there exists barriers to information and resources in support of career development and inclusive skills development opportunities. For our community to reach its potential, all Calgarians must commit to having justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) embedded in the skills development process and championed by all levels. We must harness the potential of the diverse voices, ideas, and talents of our labour market.

The Solution

Calgary’s learning system must adopt strategies to unlock, inspire, and develop the potential for all to prosper in the new economy. Programs and services need to be created with a mindset that puts people at the centre, designing opportunities by and with people within the target markets of groups that skill developers are looking to deliver programs to.

Employers must develop recruitment strategies that embed diverse cultural approaches and understandings. They must adapt their employee experience and workplace culture to support the success of diverse employees. Employers also need to have access to a harmonized ecosystem that is using a common currency to identify skilled individuals based on their merits rather than informal methods.

Learning organizations and institutions need to offer equitable access to information and a skills development network of informal and formal learning opportunities that further reduces barriers, opens doors and inspires lifelong learning habits that create a more resilient and empowered workforce.

3,063

The number of learning and skills development organizations in Calgary.

30,870

The number of skills development programs offered annually in Calgary.

3.5M

The number of experiences delivered annually in the creative arts.

The Barrier of Systemic Labour Market Bias

The hiring process involves some of the highest risk decisions an employer will ever make. Employers look to de-risk this process by asking for evidence that candidates possess specific skills considered relevant to a role. A common form of evidence employers may seek are formal certifications of a specific skills. For example, an employer seeking a project manager may only pursue candidates who possess their Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. Skill certification incorporates a rigorous process confirming that an individual has a defined combination of aptitude, ability, knowledge, and functional skills. These certification processes are broadly recognized by employers as effective signals of a candidate's actual skills.

However, beyond a narrow list of recognized professional and technical certifications, most skill areas or occupations don't offer a path to formal certification. In a [recent study](#), 96 per cent of hiring managers in Calgary recruiting marketers adopted a range of informal methods to verify skills. One common approach was to request a specific academic credential, projecting an assumption that completing a degree, diploma, or course in a specific area is evidence of a skill in this area. As an example, employers may use a degree in marketing as confirmation that a candidate is able to manage a social media campaign without proof as to whether that individual was taught about the specific social media platform during their degree. Other common informal methods include references, previous work experience, employment probation, and testing during the hiring process. This study found employers adopted at least three informal methods to verify a skill.

The challenge is many [informal methods](#) have little to do with skill verification, but rather become the foundation for amplifying systemic bias and prejudice during the hiring process. The simple inclusion of a specific academic credential as an informal validation of skills immediately removes a large segment of Calgary's population from this role due to the cost of higher education. Similarly, research shows that many roles are recruited through an employer's own personal and professional networks reflect the employer's personal values, not the ability for a candidate to complete a job. In both these examples, the systemic bias is largely unconscious. However, the impact is real on both the organization and Calgarians. For the organization, this bias is a barrier to recruiting the best candidates for a job. Similarly, qualified candidates are being excluded from consideration, not because they don't possess the skills, but rather, they may not reflect the stereotyped profile sought by an employer.

We are committed to making real and intentional progress across EDI and Indigenous Reconciliation so everyone can participate in all aspects of the economy.

[Calgary in the New Economy](#)

An emphasis on skill certification can also dismiss the value of lived experience as an asset in recruitment and employment. This not only contributes to inequitable recruitment and employment opportunities for those who may face barriers to certification, but also risks invalidating the diverse ideas, perspectives, and enabling skills developed through lived experience. All of which, when considered equally alongside skill certification, can contribute to an innovative and prosperous economy.

Unlocking the Potential of Every Calgarian

Unlocking the potential of every Calgarian will not only close labour market gaps, it is also the right thing for us, as a city, to do. This is how Calgary can foster more opportunities to have prosperity for all. All Calgarians must commit to confronting the systemic biases in our labour market by introducing employment and programming practices that prioritize equitable access, diverse voices and talents, and evidence-based skills verification. This includes:

Increased valuation on skills-based employment practices:

To reduce the use of informal validation methods, employers need a skill verification system that is decoupled from the pathway in which the learning occurs. In other words, it does not matter where one learned the skill, only that one can do the skill.

The benefit of such an approach is not just in having a more reliable method of assessing skills, but also in creating a more equitable recruitment process. Newcomers, equity-deserving communities, and individuals from lower economic levels would all be given equal opportunity to demonstrate their skills and abilities regardless of where they were acquired. In explicitly prioritizing enabling skills, including accelerating their development and verification, employers (both skills developers and industry) in Calgary will together facilitate the ability for our city to transition to a skills-based labour market that is more accessible with a more truly qualified workforce.

An Example:

In 2022, a consortium of Calgary partners (Calgary Arts Development, Calgary Economic Development, and the Calgary Marketing Association) launched a pilot branded **Trusted Skills**. This is an ongoing pilot that introduced four decoupled marketing certifications and two film & TV certifications. Extending the Trusted Skills pilot to assess the ability to effectively certify harmonized enabling skills with more industries would support the refining and scaling of this practice.



A shared commitment to confront systemic bias:

Companies with ethnically diverse workforces display at least 35 per cent greater financial returns and are 158 per cent more likely to understand and innovate to serve a diverse client base. A study by Calgary Economic Development states, “Integrating diverse groups within the workplace helps employers access new markets, build new professional relations around the globe, and support Calgary’s growing innovative ecosystem.” Despite this, we know that there are many barriers individuals, especially in equity-deserving groups, face when it comes to the labour market or accessing programming for skill development.

As part of our journey towards being a city that continually adapts and learns from each other all Calgarians have a responsibility to commit to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) and create an accessible skills development ecosystem. One that embeds JEDI principles to increase access to support services, design and delivery of skills development programming, and hiring practices, and that sees them reflected and championed by executive leadership teams.

A commitment to JEDI is a lifelong journey. It can be challenging, and it is one that does not have to be taken alone. The *Calgary Skills Development Framework* proposes that open access resources should be developed collectively and are to be shared so that a diverse range of employers can benefit from them. Small-to-medium enterprises that may not have the capacity to engage in their own JEDI resource developments could be empowered through this and large organizations could share their learnings as part of their wider social responsibility activities. In addition, collaborating with Canadian peer cities to harmonize JEDI benchmarking could establish a way in which we can hold ourselves accountable to the work and demonstrate progress in addressing systemic bias.

Equitable access to resources:

It is important to recognize that not everyone has access to the resources and learning opportunities that support skills development and certification. Many programs and training options are fee-based. Public organizations (such as public libraries) have an important role in fostering equitable access to learning and skills development opportunities, particularly for marginalized or vulnerable populations. A coordinated continuum of informal and formal learning created in partnership between public organizations, educational institutions, and industry, can empower people to define and explore their career goals and develop a dynamic, and personalized, plan to achieve them.

We envision an inclusive Calgary, offering prospective talent the opportunity to work for organizations aligned with their values and in an environment where work-life balance is taken to heart.

Calgary Chamber of Commerce

An Example:

Calgary Public Library supports the development of digital literacy skills for patrons of all ages and offers free access to computers and WIFI at 21 locations across the city. Laptops are available for loan and use at home, reducing barriers to technology tools not only for learning but for job searching and recruitment and free meeting rooms provide community space for meetings and interviews. The Job Desk service, designed in partnership between the Calgary Public Library and Bow Valley College offers free online or in-person drop-in career supports and counselling to ensure that all Calgarians, particularly those from equity-deserving groups, have ready access.

Investments in diverse programming developed by diverse communities:

In recent years, with various social movements coming to the forefront of the media and the general trend towards more diversity in all aspects of society, there has been a desire to target specific equity-deserving communities including newcomers, BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, etc. However, diverse programming is more effective and impactful when designed by and with the communities it is meant to serve.

Calgary is Canada's third most diverse major city. We recognize this by acknowledging that all of us come from very different walks of life. Beyond just ethnic or cultural differences, diversity also includes the diversity of thoughts, physical abilities, interests, upbringings, and much more. Diverse perspectives and ideas also contribute to stronger innovation, both in training programs and industry. Solutions cannot be designed until the problems are fully understood, and that cannot happen without centering the voices and experiences of those who will be impacted by the solution.

If we are to truly celebrate the diversity of the residents in our city, we also need to ensure that all Calgarians have a sense of belonging within the labour market. Those with lived experience need to be involved in the development of programs that are intended to support others within their communities to learn in a way that respects the nuances of culture, expression, and how they learn best.

An Example:

Calgary's Trade Accelerator Program (TAP) recently hosted a cohort designed and led entirely by Indigenous business leaders. These Indigenous leaders came together to support other Indigenous businesses in becoming export ready so they could sell their goods and services in markets outside of Calgary. The program was able to be reimagined with its community and audience's needs at the centre. There was facilitation and coordination provided by the TAP team, but it was organized such that the TAP team were able to respectfully step out of the process so that there was space for learning to happen in a way best received by the cohort.

We need to embody the values we wish to create—an Alberta that demonstrates its commitment to diversity, inclusion and equity.

Business Council of Alberta

Reimagining spaces:

Placemaking involves intentionality in accessibility and design of meeting spaces for diverse groups of people.

For people in lower socioeconomic classes, navigating urban spaces in the winter, for example, could prove insurmountable without a reliable, independent form of transportation.

These spaces can be employed as program venues for the immigrant community and other equity-deserving groups. This not only provides physical access but also reduces the unnecessary energy required to overcome these barriers.

Effective public space designs and programs find a balance between public and private needs. Addressing social issues such as affordability and cultural representation all play into whether people will choose to access a public program.

An Example:

The Nigerian-Canadian Association of Calgary owns a building in the Northeast of Calgary that is used as a cultural centre. This is a place to exhibit and promote aspects of Nigerian culture and heritage that would contribute positively to the Canadian cultural mosaic. Having a dedicated physical space allows the centre to act as a focal point of a network to promote social and economic benefit of its members and society.

The Path Forward

It is estimated that moving to a fully accessible and inclusive society would create a value of \$337.7 billion for Canadian society. This is a sizeable proportion of gross domestic product (17.6 per cent) and is likely a conservative estimate of the potential benefits.

There is huge opportunity for Calgary to demonstrate leadership in this area, not just to claim a piece of the financial pie, but because this is the right thing to do for our city and its residents.

As part of our journey towards being a city that continually adapts and learns from each other, all Calgarians have a responsibility to commit to JEDI and create an accessible skills development ecosystem. One that embeds JEDI principles in access to support services, design and delivery of skills development programming, hiring practices, and sees them reflected and championed by executive leadership teams.

*“What we see is the power of unity.
What happens to one happens to us all.
We can starve together or feast
together. All flourishing is mutual.”*

Robin Wall Kimmerer - Author, Scientist, Professor



Photo: Jonathan Jacobs

Creating a learning system that is accessible to all is a challenge we need to undertake together. We must adopt these strategies to unlock, inspire, and develop the potential for all to prosper in the new economy:

- Increased valuation on skills-based employment practices
- A shared commitment to confront systemic bias
- Equitable access to resources
- Investments in diverse programming developed by diverse communities
- Reimagining spaces

For our community to reach its potential, all Calgarians must commit to having justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion embedded in the skills development process and championed by all levels. We must harness the potential of the diverse voices, ideas, and talents of our labour market.

Cities with strong economies also have inclusive strategies for labour force participation.

Mayor Gondek

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