

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF MANAGERS AND LEADERS IN CANADA'S CAREER DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

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This research study was conducted by the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) as part of their Career Development Professional Centre (CDPC) project. CDPC is an initiative funded by the Government of Canada via the Future Skills Centre Program, with partner support from MixtMode. CCDF is committed to ensuring that every Canadian has the skills, strategies, and support they need to navigate education, employment, and career transitions successfully. To this end, CCDF conducts rigorous research to strengthen the evidence base, develops innovative career development programs and resources, creates educational/labour market policy solutions and builds the capacity of the career development profession to offer timely, targeted, inclusive and impactful services. CCDF undertakes projects that:

- Prepare Canadians to enter the workforce, manage ongoing learning and become skillful architects of future career transitions;
- Address the barriers that impede under-represented groups from accessing and succeeding in learning and work opportunities;
- Increase access to career programs and services and ensure that those supports are inclusive and address consumers' intersectionality;
- Build strong workforce pipelines and assist employers to create quality workplaces that maximize inclusion, worker satisfaction and productivity.

Through this work, CCDF promotes positive health, social and economic outcomes for individuals, communities, employers and Canada.

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Executive Summary

This report examines the experiences of managers and leaders in Canada's career development sector, based on a Spring 2024 study conducted by the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) as part of the Career Development Professional Centre (CDPC) initiative. This is the first pan-Canadian research project to focus specifically on supervisors, managers, and leaders within the sector.

The study aimed to understand the challenges, responsibilities, and learning needs of managers and leaders. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative survey data. The survey, conducted between January 24 and March 15, 2024, included 37 questions and gathered responses from 187 participants (176 in English, 11 in French). Despite a small sample size, with most respondents having worked in frontline service delivery, the data provide insights into the demographic profile, professional journeys, and training needs of sector managers and leaders.

Key findings centred around managerial challenges, training needs, sector gaps or disconnects, and systemic issues facing the sector, especially as they related to funding and lack of standardized hiring, training, and certification requirements for workers.

Several recommendations emerged from the study, across three groups, frontline CDPs, current managers/leaders, and senior leaders and funders, as well as recommendations for further research.

Broadly, the research highlighted the critical gaps and opportunities in Canada's career development sector. Managers and leaders face significant challenges that hinder their ability to drive meaningful change. Addressing these gaps requires a commitment to professional training, evidence-based practices, and systemic reform. The sector must move away from transactional models toward a more integrated, professional approach to career development to effectively meet the evolving needs of Canadians.



Report Structure

This report begins with a brief introduction then shares research findings through two main sections: Respondent Profile and Key Findings. To keep the report to a reasonable length, a decision was made to leave out any charts or graphs, relying only on a narrative format. Access to the various charts/graphs may be available upon request to CCDF. Whenever quantitative data are shared, percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer for ease of reading.

Introduction

In January 2023, CCDF, in partnership with MixtMode and with funding support by the Government of Canada, via the Future Skills Centre, launched CDPC (<https://cdpc-cedc.ca/>). A key focus for CDPC has been foundational training on a reimagined career development process and, over the last two years, close to 900 frontline practitioners have participated in what they have described as a transformational learning experience.

Recognizing managers and leaders play a pivotal role in Canada's career development / employment services sector, the CDPC embarked on the sector's first ever pan-Canadian research project focussed solely on supervisors, managers, and leaders across the full career development ecosystem.

Survey Overview

The research took a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative questions. The survey comprised two parts, one focussing more on demographic information and the other on challenges and learning needs experienced by those in management/leadership positions. There were 37 questions in total, some required and some optional.

The survey opened Wednesday January 24, 2024 and closed Friday March 15, 2024. The invitation to participate was sent to CCDF's contact list and recipients of CDPC's monthly newsletter. It was also promoted at the CCDF booth at the Cannexus 2024 conference, and via various social media channels. All invitations to participate included a request to pass the survey information to colleagues. This approach to data collection may have contributed to a somewhat skewed sample, with respondents being very connected to CCDF's network and to the career development sector. A total of 176 responded to the English survey, and 11 to the French. Due to the small number of French respondents, their data was combined with the English data resulting in one data set for analysis.



Respondent Profile

The majority of respondents were aged 40-49 (40%¹), followed by those aged 50-59 (28%). Some respondents were younger (30-39 years old; 17%) or older (60+ years; 16%). Respondents came from all provinces and territories with the majority coming from Ontario (29%) and British Columbia (22%). Most of the sample was female, although almost 18% of respondents were male. A minority of respondents either preferred not to answer or identified as non-binary. Respondents had a diverse set of identities, including Indigenous (23%), person with a disability (19%), racialized person (19%), and immigrant/newcomer (13%).

The majority of respondents worked in a non-profit organization (42%) located in an urban setting (62%). About 20% worked in an organization in a rural setting, with just 11% in a suburban setting. Post-secondary education institutions (25%), government (12%), and for-profit organization (11%) were other reported work settings. Regardless of work setting or location, most respondents (54%) worked in organizations with more than 50 employees, with 17% working in an organization with 11-20 employees, 12% with less than 10 employees, and 7% with 21-30 employees. Most respondents worked in organizations serving a range of clientele. About half the organizations serve either anyone who comes to the service (27%) or unemployed adults (27%). About a fifth (21%) serve post-secondary students.

Most respondents reported having post-secondary education, with 33% having a Bachelor's degree, and 28% having a Master's degree; 28% have a post-secondary certificate or diploma. There was a wide range of responses shared when reporting primary area of study for the reported education, including social sciences, education, career development, and business and administration. Recognizing that English speaking Canadians cannot access undergraduate or graduate education programs focussed on career development, respondents were asked to report on how many hours of dedicated learning they had completed that focussed on career development / employment services. The vast majority, 70%, reported 61 or more hours, with 10% having completed 31-60 hours and 13% reporting 11-30 hours.

Respondents were then asked how many hours of dedicated learning they completed that was specific to management/supervision. This number dropped significantly compared to dedicated learning in career development, with only 50% of respondents having 61+ hours, 17% having 31-60 hours, and 19% having 10-30 hours of training.

Just under 50% of respondents have worked in the career development sector for 15 years or more with 22% having 10-14 years' experience, and 19% having 5-9 years. Only 10% of respondents had less than 5 years' experience working in the sector. This connects with 87% of respondents reporting they had frontline experience prior to

¹ Note: All percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer for ease of reading



moving into management (only 13% reported no frontline experience) and 85% reporting they understood frontline work enough they could fill in for absent staff, if necessary. Only 9% reported a moderate understanding, not sufficient to fill in for staff, and just 6% reported only a superficial knowledge of frontline work. This deep experience in the sector is also reflected in that most respondents professionally identify in career development (63%), followed by education (11%) and social work (8%).

Although respondents have a significant history of work in the field, many reported being relatively new to management, with 41% being in the role for less than 5 years, 27% being in a management role 5-9 years and just 15% with either 10-14 years or more than 15 years' experience in a management role. The majority (56%) of respondents reported being in a team leadership or middle management role with 38% being in executive or senior management.

Key Findings

The survey generated a considerable amount of data, more than is presented here. The findings selected for inclusion in this report are those that are reasonably clear and conclusive. The findings not summarized here are those in which respondent numbers are insufficient to draw meaningful conclusions or the design of the survey item inadvertently created ambiguity in the responses.

Experiences with Management/Leadership

The journey into management/leadership within career development was varied, though given that most respondents have significant frontline experience, there were common themes of working in administrative and supporting roles before moving into frontline service delivery roles, then transitioning into supervisory or team leader role before becoming a manager. Respondents without frontline experience in career development reported being in supervisory or management roles in other sectors and making more of a lateral move into career development. In some cases, these are from sectors adjacent to career development such as human resources and vocational rehabilitation whereas others had management/leadership experience in sales, IT, or finance before moving into career development.

Despite no longer working in frontline service directly, respondents reported client success as what they most enjoyed about their work. This included building hope for the future, supporting change, helping others find their passion and meaningful employment, and enhancing wellbeing. Another area of enjoyment related to supporting, coaching, and mentoring staff. This included helping staff progress in their own careers, assisting staff to develop their skills and knowledge to better support clients, and building and growing their teams.



Managers/Leaders also reported that making a difference in communities was an important contributor to their enjoyment. Many respondents recognized that career development goes beyond helping the individuals served, noting that each person who is helped also helps families and communities, leading to broader economic prosperity and growth. Many respondents also reported enjoying program and resource development, to better meet the needs of clients.

Respondents reflected on their career journey and shared what they wished they had known before they began their work as a sector manager/leader. Several themes emerged, often around duties and responsibilities requiring different skills and knowledge than what they had gained working in frontline practice. The first theme revolved around personnel, including how to mentor staff, build effective teams, manage diverse personalities, and address conflicts. Another key theme related to overall business and administrative tasks including budgeting and fiscal management and managing projects and contracts.

Overall, this cohort of respondents seem to have considerable knowledge, skill, and wisdom within career development / employment services, bringing that expertise into their roles managing practitioners and programs (though that knowledge is not without gaps). A smaller number of respondents built their careers in other sectors, moving into management / leadership roles before moving into the career development sector. This latter cohort likely has expertise in overall business management but might lack critical understanding of career development's processes, dimensions, and scope of practice.

When asked what they enjoy most about their work, one respondent said,

“As a leader within a career development service, what I find most fulfilling is the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in the lives of individuals and communities. Witnessing the transformative journey of individuals as they navigate their career paths and achieve their professional aspirations brings me immense satisfaction. I derive great joy from guiding and supporting my team in providing high-quality services that empower individuals to unlock their full potential and pursue rewarding careers. Moreover, I am deeply inspired by the collaborative efforts of our organization to address complex challenges in the employment landscape and foster inclusive opportunities for all. Being able to lead a team dedicated to facilitating positive change and promoting economic empowerment reinforces my passion for this work and fuels my commitment to advancing the well-being of those we serve.”



Responsibilities

Most respondents indicated that their biggest area of responsibility was staff management and development,² including recruitment and retention, training and mentoring, and managing performance and practice. The next most common theme is program management, including developing and evaluating programs and services, ensuring all are aligned to organizational goals and client needs, as well as attending to quality assurance³ and key performance indicators, overseeing program services, and managing all program activities. Related to this is ensuring all those accessing service are getting their needs met, feel supported, and are receiving quality service.

When asked about the 3 most significant challenges being seen or experienced, one respondent stated,

“Staff are generally unhappy (rising costs of living, increasing isolation in the world, politics are polarized) expectations on employers to solve everything are unrealistic. Funding from government contracts is sparse and out of touch with service delivery needs and increased costs to deliver services.”

Another area of responsibility relates to strategic planning and direction as well as setting and communicating the organization’s vision. Adapting to changes and fostering innovation were also mentioned as responsibilities by some respondents. Building and maintaining stakeholder relationships, including communications and public relations, is another area of responsibility that emerged.

What Keeps Managers Awake at Night?

Respondents had a lot to say when reporting on the three most significant challenges they experience in their roles as managers / leaders within career development and employment services. These are described in the following themes.

Current and Future Staff

Managers and leaders face significant challenges in managing human resources effectively. The challenges most reported by respondents can be divided into two key areas. The first area involves personnel management, which includes evaluating staff performance, addressing underperformance, resolving conflicts, motivating team members, and ensuring access to professional development opportunities—particularly in a field with limited formal training pathways. The second area also pertains to personnel but relates more to recruiting and onboarding new

² This was also the area respondents wished they had known more about before moving into management which makes sense given front line practitioners likely would not have had this type of training/experience.

³ Note: quality assurance is separate and distinct from quality service. The first is concerned with expectations of funders/contracts, meeting KPIs, whereas the latter focusses on meeting the needs of clients.



employees, as well as addressing retention issues often driven by funding limitations and resource constraints.

Administrative Weight

Another significant challenge is the overall administrative burden managers and leaders face, though respondents often did not go into the specifics of these burdens. Those who did mentioned excessive emails, HR administration, and burdensome policies and procedures that negatively impact service delivery. Another theme that likely falls under the category of administrative challenges is dealing with high workloads, managing time and tasks, and juggling competing priorities.

Generating Work and Revenue

The process of writing and submitting proposals for funding is seen as a significant challenge due to its complexity and required time commitment. Linked to proposal writing is the ongoing need to obtain/secure funding, especially when budget allotments are not keeping pace with service delivery costs. Within this are overall budget constraints and the challenge of working with limited resources, both financial and human, making it difficult to meet organizational needs and provide high-quality services.

Service Delivery

Developing and implementing effective service delivery models that are client-centric and equitable is a challenge faced by many respondents. Included here is the need to adapt services to diverse client populations, especially those with additional barriers or unique needs.

Leadership Strategy

Lastly, strategic planning and leadership, particularly in navigating organizational changes and providing clear direction, are critical challenges managers/leaders face.

Overall, these themes indicate a multifaceted and demanding role, requiring a balance of administrative, interpersonal, and strategic skills.

What Might Help Managers Sleep?

Respondents were asked to share one thing they would change about the career development/employment services sector. The biggest theme related to funding and the overall contracting environment that underpins Canada's public employment system. Respondents mentioned the need for long-term, sustainable funding models that provide stability and increased flexibility. Additional financial resources to support clients and the urgent need for increased wages were also mentioned by numerous respondents.



Another theme centred around the staff and the overall career development profession. Numerous respondents mentioned the need for additional professional development opportunities, consistent access to training and education, and greater access to specialized training in career development.

In addition to the deep need for targeted training, respondents also outlined the need for recognition for their work, the field, and the contributions and impact of career development on individuals, families, and communities. There was an emphasis on national certification/accreditation, and the adoption of proper titles and standards that reflect levels of education and expertise, and the central importance of the field.

The administrative burden surfaced again, with many respondents noting a need for less paperwork/documentation and a reduction in the number of reports required to allow more focus on direct client service.

When asked to share one thing they would change in the sector, one respondent stated,

“Increased flexibility within government contracts to allocate funds where the need is, this enables contractors to be more responsive to service delivery needs, current funding envelopes are too restrictive. Also, contracts need to be increased to respond to inflation.”

The need to move towards more personalized, holistic approaches that serve the unique needs of each client, including addressing mental health needs and providing other supports was mentioned by several respondents. Within the same theme, respondents expressed the desire to shift the focus from just any employment outcome to understanding and reporting the progress indicators required to achieve sustainable labour market outcomes.

The final two themes focused on improving partnerships with employers to create better job opportunities and highlight the importance of career development services, as well as promoting cooperation among service providers to better support clients.

Talent / Performance Management

The survey then asked managers/leaders about practice or clinical supervision (i.e., feedback and coaching specific to how staff members are working with clients) and overall performance management (e.g., staff performance expectations, appraisals, and career goals). The following sections outline responses across these two categories, though there are some indications throughout that respondents had different interpretations of the meaning of practice supervision. For example, some respondents stated that once initial onboarding and job shadowing period ends, it is up to the individual CDP to seek support. Although that might work, in theory with an open-door policy, it does not fit with the spirit or intent of practice supervision.



Practice Supervision

Half of the respondents noted that frontline practitioners get practice or clinical supervision, in a more informal manner, with 38% noting this is done formally. Nine percent said there is no supervision and 3% weren't sure. For those who reported frontline practitioners do have access to supervision, 72% said this was part of their responsibilities, while 28% said it is not. How practice supervision is done is varied and includes both individual (e.g., one-on-one supervision meetings to provide personalized support and address individual needs) and group supervision / case conferencing. For some organizations, supervision seems to be more ad hoc or as needed, using an open-door policy to allow staff to seek support. Others have regularly scheduled check-ins to ensure continuous support and development. Some respondents take a mentorship approach, offering in-house opportunities as well as access to external mentors to provide guidance and professional development.

When asked to describe how clinical/practice supervision is done within their organization, one respondent stated,

“When people are hired they will job shadow someone else, and then when they are ready to meet clients we try to have someone shadow them for the first 2 weeks. From there the expectation is for staff to come to you with questions or concerns. We also have a weekly case conference meeting with client facing staff to discuss challenges we are running into.”

Performance Management

Respondents focus more on performance management than practice supervision. Just over three-quarters of respondents reported they had formal performance management practices in place, with 18% using an informal approach to performance management. Six percent said their organization had no performance management practices in place. For those that have some performance management practices, 84% of respondents reported this was included in their responsibility, with 16% saying it is not.

The majority of respondents relied on annual one-on-one performance reviews, though a small number reported bi-annual or quarterly reviews with some of these being linked to KPIs. Others reported a more informal approach to performance management, such as regular or ongoing check-ins. Others reported a combination of annual performance reviews with regular more informal check-ins. Several respondents noted that staff goal setting was an integral part of both informal and formal performance management processes.

Recruitment, Retention, and Onboarding

Close to 40% of respondents spend less than 10% of their time/energy on handling staff shortages or working on recruitment. Another 30% spend 11-20% of their time on these responsibilities and 13% report spending more than 30% of their time.



Further, 55% of respondents reported a turnover rate of less than 30% and 33% reported a turnover rate of 30-50%.

Just over 90% of respondents have formal orientation/onboarding processes. The most common approach is mentoring and job shadowing, having the new staff person work with a more senior practitioner to coach them in the role. Others have what seem to be a more complex process, including written manuals, onboarding checklists, comprehensive training plans, and formalized, structured processes. The length and complexity of orientation/onboarding is quite varied, from 1 day or week to 30 days, 3 months or a full year, complete with goals and tasks for both the new hire and the staff/supervisor supporting them in the new role.

Learning and Development

The final section of the survey explored the training/professional development needs of managers/supervisors, their preferred format, and available time/budget.

Respondents had a long list of training/learning needs, including:

1. **Leadership and Management Skills:**

- Delegating and Performance Management:
 - Many respondents indicated a need for improving their skills in managing staff, setting boundaries, and delegating tasks effectively.
- Conflict Resolution and Coaching:
 - There is a significant demand for training in conflict management and handling difficult conversations with employees.
- Leadership Development:
 - Ongoing leadership development, including executive leadership training and mentorship, is a priority.

2. **Human Resources and Financial Management:**

- HR Administration and Policies:
 - Training in human resource management, recruitment, and retention strategies is commonly requested.
- Budgeting and Financial Literacy:
 - Financial management skills, including budgeting and proposal writing, are frequently mentioned as areas needing improvement.

3. **Technology and Data Management:**

- AI Integration and Data Management:
 - Learning how to integrate AI into career development practices and managing data effectively was an identified need.
- Data Management and Analysis:
 - There is a need for training in using data to inform decision-making.
- Up-to-Date Technology Skills:
 - There is a need to keep up with the latest technology, including Office 365, ChatGPT, and other tools.

4. **Specialized Training:**

- Trauma-Informed Practice/ EDI:



- Training in trauma-informed care and understanding the impacts of trauma on clients seems to be a significant area of interest for respondents. A need for training on equity, diversity, and inclusion practices, including working with specific marginalized populations, was also mentioned.

5. **Strategic and Executive Skills:**

- Proposal Writing and Grant Management:
 - Effective proposal writing and managing grants are frequently mentioned as areas requiring improvement.
- Networking and Stakeholder Management:
 - Enhancing skills in building partnerships and managing relationships with stakeholders and employers is seen as critical by manager/supervisor respondents.
- Strategic Planning:
 - Developing skills in strategic planning and long-term business planning is a priority for many leaders.

Despite a long list of training wants/needs, most respondents have limited time to devote to training. The majority (42%) have 1-3 hours per month on average, with 27% having 4-6 hours and 17% having 7-10 hours per month they could set aside for training. A further area of potential challenge revolves around budget. Forty-four percent of respondents have annual budgets of \$1,000 or less to spend on their own training and professional development. Sixteen percent of respondents have between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per year and just 11% have more than \$2,000 in their annual training and professional development budgets.

Most respondents (27%) prefer workshops for their professional development, followed by hybrid courses (24%), conferences (11%), and online asynchronous courses (10%).

Recommendations

Recommendations can be broken down into two key themes. The first focuses on various interest holders, including frontline CDPs, existing managers/leaders, senior leadership and executive directors, and funders. The next focuses on recommendations for further research.

Sector Interest Holders

Frontline CDPs who may be looking for opportunities to move into management / leadership roles within the sector are, based on this research, encouraged to put their career development expertise and skills to good use. They should research the types of opportunities throughout the ecosystem, conduct informational interviews, reflect on the skills that need to be developed, and what skills would be left behind in a move to management to make informed decisions. As shown in this research,



respondents enjoy their work but much of that enjoyment comes from client successes, rather than their actual day-to-day work.

Many already in management/leadership would likely benefit from taking time to reflect on their current roles, considering what is working well, what isn't, and what needs to change. Despite identifying several areas that would benefit from training, an argument could be made that investing in additional training and/or professional development may not be the best use of limited time and energy. Instead, perhaps there are opportunities to address capacity gaps in other ways, especially with reports of limited time and budget for professional development. Managers/leaders could identify opportunities to become more involved in various advocacy initiatives, helping improve sector working conditions or encouraging funders to adopt evidence-based practices and process. They could also consider what actions could be taken to minimize administrative burdens, whether that is handling their own workflows or via a change to agency operations.

Senior leadership and executive directors are encouraged to use this research to consider the training needs of their direct reports, and how they might provide opportunities for skill development. Further, this research identified an urgent need to address the administrative burdens managers/leaders are under and explore opportunities to streamline tasks and integrate technology solutions, including how artificial intelligence and automation might assist with administrative tasks. Reducing administrative burdens would leave managers/leaders with more professional time focused on the nuanced service delivery required to achieve desired outcomes.

Similarly, it is recommended that funders consider strategies to reduce paperwork, administrative tasks, report writing, and other activities that take managers and leaders away from the important work that needs to be done. Funders are also encouraged to pay attention to evidence-based research, consider the benefits of meaningful, targeted career development, and listen to the sector's experts to ensure Canadians are accessing needed services and accountabilities are meaningfully linked to those needs.

Further Research

In looking ahead, there is some value in doing further research to learn more about this cohort of workers within the career development ecosystem. Based on findings, questions could be refined and improved upon but, more importantly, there could be concerted efforts made to expand the respondent pool to more fully represent the full range of managers and leaders, including those who may be less engaged with thought leadership, research, and training/professional development in the sector.



Another potential area of further research is on the skills, knowledge, and abilities needed to be a successful manager/leader within the ecosystem. This could be an addendum to the [Pan-Canadian Competency Framework for Career Development Professionals](#), expanding on the leadership competencies already included in the framework and developing a national standard for managers/leaders to complement the one for frontline practitioners underpinning national certification.

Although this project surfaced a need for and interest in training, it was also clear that the areas of need are vast and the time and budget for training are limited. Further research could investigate the complexities of leadership development in the sector. Managers indicated an interest in training, but the degree to which this interest leads to taking training is not clear. Also unknown are the stumbling blocks that prevent managers from taking training they are interested in and the possible nudges that would make it more likely that their interest is converted into engaging in training or systematic learning.

The findings of the current study do not address questions regarding the workplace application of competencies acquired in training. To what degree do managers apply the new skills and competencies acquired in training? What inhibits or encourages them from doing so? To what degree are managers genuinely interested in learning new competencies compared to their interest in simply solving the problems they face? It could be that managers already have the competencies required to solve some key problems but do not experience conditions that enable them to do so.

From a sector-specific perspective, more needs to be known about the impediments to implementing new skills and strategies and ways to reduce or remove these impediments. Conversely, determining the conditions that facilitate the transfer of learning to workplace behaviour would enhance the ability of managers, managers' managers, training providers, and resource developers to increase the effectiveness of learning events/interventions. Research of this nature would lead to broader research questions about managing in the career development and employment arena. What are the impacts on learning and performance of managing in a contract-based, term-specific environment in which investing in the future may reap no benefits? What are the differences in learning and performance in small, medium, and large organizations in the sector? What learning and performance differences are there between those who have come up through the ranks in the field compared to those moving into the field more laterally as a manager?

Understanding these issues is not only an academic exercise. Millions of dollars spent on career development intervention may reap far less benefit than they could if managers in the field are not able to function at peak levels and meet the diverse and multiple demands of their roles. Managers tend to be the gatekeepers of changes in practice. Frontline practitioners can learn new processes and interventions in courses and at conferences and try these new approaches on a



limited basis but ultimately must adhere to the directives of their management. Practitioners have a unique, ground-floor perspective on the concerns and conditions of the people they serve. Funders, the gatekeepers of resources, will keep doing what they do unless they have the opportunity to be informed by solid evidence, a deep understanding of the needs of Canadians, the impact of existing policies, and potential outcomes of service delivery. Managers are the intermediary communicators between funders and practitioners. Managers in the career development sector face the difficult challenge of informing funders of changes “on the ground” while ensuring practitioners keep their eye on the prize of fulfilling the metrics agreed to with the funder. Managers need to mediate what appear to be competing interests such that change occurs at a tolerable pace for both sides and, ultimately, the needs of Canadians are anticipated and met. Managers need and deserve help in doing so.

Conclusion

This was the first pan-Canadian exploration into the experience of managers and leaders within the career / employment services ecosystem and it was long overdue. As happens with research projects, as data were reviewed there were many things we wished we had done differently to gain deeper clarity and glean more answers. For example, when exploring how much training respondents had specifically focussed on career development, the greatest category stopped at 61+ hours. At that time, that may have seemed like a high benchmark, but in hindsight that is a relatively low number of hours, overall. It is an especially low number when considering the length of time most respondents had been in the field.

There is also more work to be done in connecting with managers and leaders with little to no background in career development. Although some of these are included here, most respondents have a long history of frontline practice and, by virtue of the sampling methodology, were more likely to be engaged already with thought leadership, research and innovation in this space. That being said, despite a long history of frontline practice, the capacity gaps noted in the Responsive Career Pathways⁴ research papers are evident throughout these findings. It is not safe to assume that those in the field with extensive experience have deep knowledge and understanding of career development processes, scope of practice, theoretical underpinnings, or the evidence-base. It is important to dig more deeply into the competencies of those with frontline experience and to further explore the experience of those who have “parachuted into” the field from elsewhere. This further investigation could help to uncover the most direct and effective routes into management and uncover existing strengths and capacity gaps.

⁴ <https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/responsive-career-pathways/>



Perhaps most importantly, the recent *Addressing the “Spin Cycle”* report⁵ demonstrated that the overall system itself, especially the public employment system, is caught in an unhealthy and untenable spin cycle. Funding of public employment services is tied to the speed and number of employment placements, creating an environment that incentivizes ignoring clients’ readiness needs and moving them prematurely into employment. This results in a spin cycle in which clients are set up to fail. In the best-case scenario, they return to the public employment service and the cycle repeats. Too often, however, recognizing the services cannot address their fundamental needs, they don’t return to service, move into long term unemployment and/or spin into more costly systems, such as mental health, addictions or corrections. This theme also appeared as an underlying tension throughout many responses.

The findings of this study suggests that managers may be caught in a spin cycle of their own. They are constantly writing proposals or seeking funding within a system that lacks, in many cases, an understanding of career development needed to design programs and services that work for those in need and fails to integrate proven approaches that are responsive to current and emergent labour market demands. Managers and leaders can only do so much with the patchwork of variable standards for practice and approaches to service delivery which, depending on the jurisdiction, may ignore quality design standards and evidence-informed policies and practices. Depending on the organization, and region, they might hire staff with little to no training in career development and with limited access to professional development supports. Relying on on-the-job training too often results in exacerbating capacity gaps, as those with insufficient knowledge and skill are the ones training and supporting new hires. Those who are trained, and who have deep connections to the field, often leave the profession altogether as their expertise is not reflected in reasonable remuneration levels and misguided policies have reduced their work to a myopic focus on administrivia rather than providing the services needed they see are required to address Canadians’ real needs and break the spin cycle.

Despite extensive frontline knowledge and experience, managers and leaders have urgent training needs yet have little time or funding to access the training needed to do their jobs effectively. Further, no training exists in the sector that is dedicated to this cohort of workers. Although other training exists (e.g., training in performance management, conflict resolution, fiscal management) it is outside of the career development context and may or may not be readily transferable to the realities within the sector.

⁵ Domene, J.F., Redekopp, D., & Warner, L. (2024), *Addressing the “Spin Cycle” in Employment Services Across Canada: Understanding the Need for Pre-Employability Programming* (Ottawa: Canadian Career Development Foundation).



Career development in Canada, especially within public employment services, is a field investing millions of dollars that affects thousands of people annually. Yet, there are clear capacity/skill gaps, insufficient attention to quality service, and minimal recognition or acceptance of certification, standards, or ethical practice. Worse is that there is no one with career development / employment services expertise informing policy directions or the development of evidence-based service delivery models. Other sectors/industries would not tolerate work tasks, processes, or delivery mechanisms being designed, and imposed, by individuals with no understanding of the actual work. Teachers, for example, are at the table when curricula are being redesigned, class size and composition being reconsidered, or day-to-day work and KPIs are being reassessed. Their input and expertise are needed and valued by policy makers. This is true of many other professions yet, within public employment services, thought leaders, researchers, and frontline professionals are not typically consulted; instead, service delivery models are imposed. As such, there is a disconnect between what frontline practice should and must look like, and what it is allowed to be via labour market development agreements. Recent research conducted by the World Association of Employment Services (WAPES) identified that, globally, more career development is needed in public employment and the system must move away from transactional service delivery models.

Yet, we must also recognize that the capacity, knowledge, and skill gaps that exist throughout Canada's career development ecosystem are of grave concern. To move away from transactional approaches requires trained professionals, adoption of clear standards, and investment in training. The sector has a Competency Framework for Career Development Practitioners, Code of Ethics, and national competency-based certification. These have been built by profession and fully endorsed by professional associations in every province and territory. What remains missing is the endorsement and support of funders and employers of those delivering career / employment services. Prior to devolution, standards for practice in this field were established and adhered to. Today, with rare exceptions, we see a degradation of accountability and, as a result, are at risk of doing harm as untrained providers are offering publicly funded services to people with complex, intersectional needs they are patently unequipped and unsupported to address.

There needs to be an immediate and fulsome understanding, across all interest holders, that current approaches to public employment services are not working well and, as a result, Canada is at risk of falling behind on a wide range of socio-economic markers.

