

Access to Career Development in Canada

Career Development Maturity Matrix

Research Brief #4

The Career Development Maturity Matrix is a benchmarking tool designed to map and spark strategic conversation about the foundational elements that the career development sector requires for its structural integrity and advancement in the years to come. Created by the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) and Challenge Factory, the Matrix identifies and measures the maturity of four sector benchmarks: quality, capacity, cohesion, and access. This brief explores access to career development in Canada.

The Pilot Study

We asked experts in Canada's career development sector to rank 1) how important each Matrix benchmark is to the sector's structural integrity, and 2) how Canada measures up against each benchmark.

The findings for the access benchmark are striking and nuanced. Overall, our survey respondents viewed access as the benchmark most in need of improvement in the Canadian sector and potentially the most difficult to achieve.

Let's unpack some important elements of the access challenge:

1. Access to career development in Canada may best be described as a **"fail first"** support system. This means that Canadians are generally expected to navigate their career development by themselves, and only seek out supports when something has "gone wrong," including unemployment and systemic barriers or discrimination.
2. The **technology** dimension of access is impacted by infrastructure (Internet and cyber devices) and literacy (how to use technology to access career development supports). Both infrastructure and literacy vary across Canada by geographical region (including urban versus rural communities), socioeconomic status, provincial/territorial funding and prioritization, and more.
3. Canada has a fair number of services targeted to under-represented and marginalized groups, but there remains unequal access to them across the country (for example, in the North). Even when tailored and enhanced services are available, outreach to target groups is not always successful and the degree to which **DEI policy and practices** are integrated into client interventions is inconsistent.

The Sector Benchmark

ACCESS

Citizen Rights

Entitlement to quality career services across the lifespan for all Canadians is protected in legislation.

Targeted Services

Under-represented and marginalized groups have access to tailored and enhanced services.

Visibility

The public knows where and how to access quality career services locally.

Technology

Access to quality service is enhanced by technology-enabled delivery.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The career development sector and its services operate based on comprehensive and current DEI policy and practices.

Where do we go from here?

Guidance for the Sector

The challenges facing access to career development in Canada have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with career development professionals working hard to establish [new partnerships and services](#) even as reductions to funding, staffing, and operations grow. The transition to remote work models has highlighted both the gaps in technology-enabled delivery and the opportunities that technology may offer if innovative approaches and solutions are pursued robustly. For these efforts to occur at a sector-wide level, leadership and broad sector cohesion are needed to push for real change and support from funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

“There is a tremendous divide between the haves and the have-nots when it comes to technology...This is one area where we should all be advocating with governments to ensure the Internet is accessible for all Canadians.”

The interruptions to targeted services caused by COVID-19, as well as the increased attention to mental health and well-being (by the general population and the sector), have also served to highlight Canada’s pre-existing “fail first” approach to career development. Rather than being understood as a lifelong process that requires consistent and collaborative engagement, Canadians often take up career supports only when they experience career disruptions (acute or chronic). In addition, there are few programs and services for Canadians who are not experiencing career disruptions but know little about career development overall. The issue of access, then, is tied not only to systemic barriers that disproportionately affect certain groups, but also the lack of awareness and visibility of career development to the general public as a whole.

Conversation Activator

Let’s think big. Imagine a Canada where access to career development is enshrined in law, career development receives buy-in at all levels, and every Canadian considers it their right and responsibility to pursue career development. What types of programs, tools, and other initiatives would you be working on in this Canada? What’s preventing the sector from building this Canada? How might this benchmarking tool help the sector move forward?

Guidance for Policymakers

The policy considerations involved in the challenge of ensuring all Canadians have access to career development can be approached from two broad directions. The first is the absence in Canada of an overall awareness of and proactive approach to careers planning and exploration across the entire lifespan. Canada is far behind [other countries](#)—such as Finland, Scotland, and Singapore—in building a national culture that 1) upholds career development as a priority for the public good, and 2) sees every Canadian committed to blending and managing their [paid and unpaid activities](#) (learning, work, volunteerism, and leisure time) while consistently and comfortably drawing on the career supports available to them through their communities, schools, employers, and other publicly and privately funded programs.

The second is the targeted improvement of access to career development in underserved and marginalized communities. Despite the increasingly critical roles that Internet connectivity and technology literacy play in work and education (especially in the wake of [COVID-19](#)), many Canadians—particularly those in [rural](#)

[and remote areas](#)—do not have adequate Internet access. Canadians also pay among the highest prices for [mobile data](#) in the world. This severely hampers career development professionals’ abilities to deliver quality services to all Canadians, and strates those services along socioeconomic, geographic, and community lines. As a result, it prevents Canadians from exploring career opportunities and aspirations, as well as contributing to Canada’s labour and employment ecosystem to their full potential.

For instance, remote Indigenous communities are some of the most economically disadvantaged in the country. They face poverty, infrastructure failures, health problems, and other consequences of systemic discrimination. Employment initiatives often default to skills training rather than more holistic, collaborative, and integrated approaches that take into account the distinctive and tightknit intersection of education, business/economic development, healthcare, and personal and cultural identity in Indigenous communities. Career development knowledge, mindsets, and competencies can play critical roles in solving complex community and policy problems by focusing on (among other things) continuous learning, resilience building, and connecting interests, beliefs, and values to market needs.

Guidance for Canadians

Accessing career development services and other supports is a right and responsibility of every Canadian. While individuals are ultimately responsible for their own careers, no Canadian should feel alone on their career journey or unable to access career-related resources. For this to become a reality, career development needs to be normalized as a best and standard practice across every individual’s career and lifespan. Accessing career supports is not an indicator of failure. Nor is it an indicator that “something has gone wrong.” It is an indicator of agency, a growth mindset, and an active pursuit of career aspirations and success.

Canadians have a powerful catalyzing voice. Although solving access challenges requires political leadership, the capacity of engaged citizens to drive change cannot be understated. By communicating their values and needs to their employers, elected officials, and community-based organizations, Canadians can move access to career development forward—increasing awareness, motivating leaders, and shaping the future.

[Sign up](#) on our project page to receive updates from CCDF and Challenge Factory about the Career Development Maturity Matrix.

Why now?

COVID-19 upended labour and employment across Canada in 2020, making career development more important and urgent than ever. As Canadians face unprecedented struggles in the world of work, the career development sector must not only step in to help, but also intentionally ensure its own structural integrity. Just as a sector like healthcare cannot effectively execute its duties to Canadians without being properly prepared in the areas of quality, capacity, cohesion, and access, so too must the career development sector actively prepare itself to face the challenges ahead. [Career development professionals have adapted](#) with innovation and commitment to the challenges and new needs of their clients. Now is the time to build on that momentum and use it to strategically push forward the Canadian sector’s maturity.