

Noel Baldwin – Collaboration is Key: The Future of Skills Development in Canada

Host: Maggie John

Overview:

Noel Baldwin joins us to discuss the need to address skills gaps in various industries. Noel Baldwin is the Interim Executive Director of the Future Skills Centre (FSC). He brings nearly two decades of experience in leading strategic initiatives and policy development in postsecondary education, adult learning and skills development. Baldwin shares his thoughts on how the pressing need to address skill gaps in various industries requires a collaborative approach between businesses and educational systems.

Highlights from our conversation include:

1. Meaningful engagement from employers is essential to initiate discussions on skills, though SMEs often face challenges in participation.
2. Educational institutions can play a pivotal role by first gaining a deep understanding of employer needs, and then building on Canada's existing skilled workforce.

MAGGIE:

It's Magnet Network Live, and I am your host, Maggie John.

We are back at Magnet Network Live. I'm your guest, Maggie John. I'm now joined by Noel Baldwin. He is the Executive Director of the Future Skills Centre. He brings nearly two decades of experience in leading strategic initiatives and policy development in post-secondary education, adult learning, and skills development. Welcome, Noel.

NOEL:

Thanks, Maggie. Great to be here.

MAGGIE:

Asking everybody, what's your big takeaway for the past two days?

NOEL:

I mean, obviously, the whole importance around collaboration, how to build really meaningful partnerships. And in a country like Canada, that's so big, so spread out across such a big territory, you have to work in partnership because no one entity or organization can do all this on their own. And we've got such amazing people working on the challenges related to skills and talent across the country that that partnership piece is really what's going to tie things together.

MAGGIE:

It seems like everybody's, that message is really resonating. They did a good job of driving it home. Yeah, yeah. I'm just excited to see what comes out of these, you know, these past two days and what people are able to do when it comes to collaboration and partnership. Let's just jump right in. What are some of the most pressing skills, Noel, and gaps that industries need to address? And how can partnerships between businesses and educational institutions accelerate this progress?

NOEL:

Yeah, I mean, I might almost start with the second part first, right? And through the six, kind of six and a half years that the Future Skills Centre has been working, one of the things that's become so clear is that the entry point for the conversation around skills needs in the country has to start with really meaningful engagement of employers. And that can be tough, right? Canadian employers, a huge proportion of them are small and medium-sized enterprises. You know, less capacity for them to do engagement. And so you've got to build those trust relationships by starting with meeting people where they are to understand the challenges that they're facing. And those are both skill and talent issues, but they're also geography, they're infrastructure. And you have to get a sense of what's really kind of underpinning this stuff. And then I think educational institutions and training providers, which can also

include union-led training, I mean, then they can start to design around that. But that really deep understanding of where employers are at, I think, comes first. And then in terms of the kind of gaps that we're seeing, let's be clear and kind of celebrate. I mean, Canada does have really skilled, really talented people all across the country. And they come out of our education and post-secondary education systems. They come to us from other parts of the world through immigration. And so it's incumbent on us, I think, to start by building on the foundation that we've got. The skills then kind of ladder themselves, right? We need really strong foundational skills, information processing, literacy and numeracy. And then you build the next layer on around critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork. And a lot of what we're hearing, I think, increasingly from employers is people need a base of technical skills for whatever industry they're going into, whatever firm they're going to enter into. Employers are often saying, with that base, we can train you up to where we need you to be to meet our needs. But you've got to have the baseline skills around how to show up in a workplace, how to work with your other colleagues, increasingly in really diverse workplaces. So there's a skill set around that, too. So there is a mix, right? And I think we need to be conscious that the specific things, and this goes back to where we started, the specific things that a sector needs or an employer needs, have to be kind of understood from the start. But, you know, it's foundational skills, it's higher order skills, and then it's technical skills in addition to that.

MAGGIE: And then where do you see Future Skill Centre coming in to kind of augment and help this?

NOEL:

Right. So, I mean, a lot of our mandate is focused around trying to understand those skill needs and skill dimensions. So how do we map that? How do we try to do a bit of projecting into the future while not claiming that we've got some kind of crystal ball? But then what we're really trying to do is find the spaces where we can look for innovation in skill development. So what can we try that's a little different or a little new in a particular sector or community or with a particular part of the population that helps speed up the process of acquiring skills, whether they're new skills or upskilling, reskilling? And then how do we understand what's working and what's not

so that we can try to scale that and build that up? And then other people can take the ball from there to do really big expansion into all kinds of other areas.

MAGGIE:

Talk to me a little bit more because I'm hearing more discussion around upskilling. And, you know, again, what you alluded to, the employers are saying, hey, we're willing to meet you where you're at and help get you to where we where you want to be and where we need you to be. Are you seeing this posture from more employers that are willing to work with people and kind of help them upskill?

NOEL:

Yeah, we absolutely are. I think that Canada is catching up in some ways, other countries, for example, in OECD and in how much we do that and in trying to get the right mix of mechanisms. Our experience with employers is they're actually often willing to put in a lot of effort. Right. We've had projects with employers where, for example, they get an incentive to release people to do training and they get reimbursed on the cost of that and they get some support to fill a spot on their production line or whatever. But they're also willing to do a lot of work with us to understand and engage all that engagement piece, to understand where they are and then to learn from what they've done so that next time we can do it even better. Like they're willing to put that effort in, but we're still trying to find the right mix of like what are the mechanisms and the incentives so the red tape doesn't get so much that they don't want to do it or like it's not, the juice isn't worth the squeeze if I can put it that way. So there's ongoing work to do there. But, you know, you think about something like the big investments to create an electric vehicle and battery manufacturing industry in Canada, right? Those lines for zero emission vehicles are very different from the lines for combustion engines. But the folks working on the combustion engine lines are also the ones who've got the experience of working in those shops and those workplaces. And I think employers are ready to say, we need to get you from here to there. We got to figure out what that bridge looks like and who's going to help us to do that. Right. So those are really open, live conversations. And there's really big opportunities on the horizon for that, I think. And we've just got to support both the employers and the workers to get from one place to the next. Yeah.

MAGGIE:

How can cross-industry collaboration help bridge the gap between the rapidly evolving needs of the labor market and the capabilities of the current workforce?

NOEL:

Yeah, I think this is, again, something that is ongoing and emerging but really important. And again, we think about some of the places we're trying to get to. We're trying to upgrade our electricity grid to reduce carbon emissions and support things like a massive new influx of ZEVs, right? The risk that we run is that we actually are competing, different sectors are competing for the same people, the same skill sets, and they kind of end up poaching, right? So how do we foster a more collective conversation about the people and the skills that we need so that we grow this pie instead of trying to cut up even smaller slices, right? We've worked with a number of sector associations and sector councils, manufacturing, biomanufacturing, aviation and aerospace to support them to do some collaborative work, for example, around the development of things like micro-credentials. Where you can do some really short, rapid training. You can get a certification that you've mastered a skill and the collaboration that they're doing will also help to make sure that those certifications and those skills can be recognized in more than one sector. So people have pathways as they need to, to move or as we need them to move, right? Cause the other thing is, you know, that power plant that's going to come online five years from now, well, someone else can be doing something in that period before then. And then maybe there's a more smooth transition so they get to the next thing and they do the next big project that's going to support Canada's economic prosperity in the future. So got to build that cross-sector collaboration so that we're building bridges and not building cul-de-sacs.

MAGGIE:

Are you seeing one industry kind of lead more in that realm more than others?

NOEL:

I mean, not from my observation in a way that I say that partly because I think everyone's trying to do it. I don't want to sort of slight anyone. But we've done some

really good work as I say, with manufacturing, biomanufacturing, folks in tourism and aviation aerospace. So like lots of them are coming around the table to this. We just have to keep, it's not maybe a natural instinct, right? Firms are competitive. There's a sense of like, well, if I get this person, that means somebody else doesn't. And we really are trying to think about how to make it bigger. We've done some really interesting work in cyberspace or cybersecurity in that same vein of let's not constantly be poaching from one another. How do we make this bigger so that everyone has the skill and talent that they need?

MAGGIE:

And what are some of the biggest obstacles, do you think, Noel, in preventing cross-industry innovation? And how can collaboration models be improved to overcome some of these challenges?

NOEL:

Yeah, it can be tricky, right? And at the firm level, and especially, I think, for SMEs, there's often a sense that they're going to invest in training and the person who's been trained up will move on somewhere else. They'll go to somewhere bigger. I mean, I think we have to keep underscoring the idea that we're trying to build a pipeline of talent and that, you know, we have highly skilled, highly talented people who are coming through that pipeline. And so as one person moves on, there will be other people who are going to come along and provide you with the skill and talent that you need. I do think on the policy front that government, and this is something that we've been trying to do, I mean, government can encourage that kind of collaboration. They can, you know, as they're supporting skill development and training, I mean, they can be more clear to say, we want you as a kind of precondition to figure out how to work with partners in another sector. And I think the other thing is, I mean, we see this a lot again, you know, kind of, I feel like I'm kind of hitting the same nail on the head, but, you know, SMEs, they can't, they can't operate in the same environment as, as a big firm when it comes to accessing resources. Right? So we've got to make it as simple and as light touch as possible to get support into places that are really going to help these firms to thrive and to grow. Ultimately, what we want from our SMEs is to get bigger and employ more people and become large firms. So how do we support them along the way when they don't have a grant

writing team or they don't have a full complement of HR staff who can do the same things that a very large firm can do?

MAGGIE:

Thank you, Noel.

NOEL:

Thank you. This was great.

MAGGIE:

That was Noel Baldwin. He is the Executive Director of Future Skills Centre.