

The need to nurture a skills economy

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We can't talk about the future of work without also talking about the future of education.

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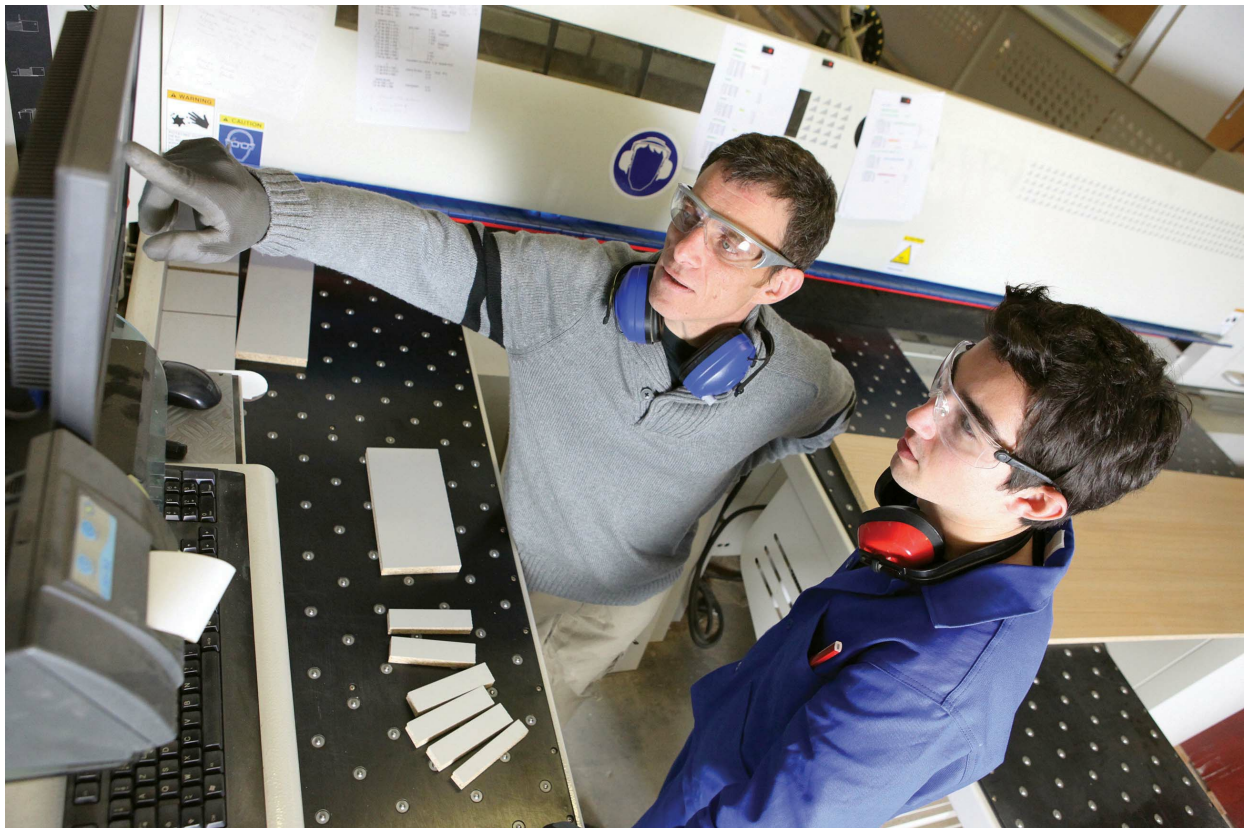
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New equipment involving computers and microcontrollers increases the pressure on available skills in the workplace. Photo: Fotolia

When leaders of the world's seven most advanced economies meet on June 8 and 9 in Charlevoix, Que., the top-line agenda item will be preparing for the jobs of the future.

What exactly does this agenda item mean for the Canadian workers, students and employers?

The proliferation of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced robotics are changing the face of work. Some jobs will be fully automated. Others will require humans to work alongside emerging technologies, leveraging the best of what machines are good at – routine tasks and analytics – against what humans are best at – critical thinking and creativity.

The structure of the labour market is also shifting. Gone are the days of gold watch careers, where individuals stick to the same employer for 50-plus years. Today's digitally-enabled economy allows jobs to be tasked-out across cities, provinces and countries, and encourages temporary contracts that come largely without benefits.

Geographically diffuse, short-term and with little social protections, the gig economy has fundamentally changed the employer-employee relationship.

The implications of these shifts are massive and as a society we need to be ready to respond. So how do we prepare?

We need to focus on skills above all else, we need innovation in credentials, and we need to bring educators and students closer to employers.

It's often difficult to match an emerging talent need to a specific credential – but breaking the need into specific skills can broaden the landscape and make a match easier to find. To succeed in an innovation economy, we need to also nurture a skills economy and develop a common and shared vocabulary about the skills that are in demand.

BC has revamped its kindergarten to Grade 12 education system to focus on applied learning and career readiness. And at the post-secondary level, institutions like Kwantlen Polytechnic University are experimenting with an admissions process that measures competencies instead of grades. Shifting our focus to skills requires buy-in from educators and employers alike.

On credentials, we need to better align the supply side of the labour market with a rapidly pivoting demand side. Placing an emphasis on completing credentials in a timely fashion is essential. For many, the goal of education is employment and to ensure skills gained while in education are immediately relevant to the labour market, speed to delivery is essential.

Canada's polytechnics and colleges offer an array of industry-aligned, short-term credentials that range from one-year certificates to three-year advanced diplomas.

We also need to be innovative in how credentials are designed and delivered. For example, a key trait we should be aiming for is “stackability” – open-ended credentials that allow learners to continuously earn credit and stack their accumulated knowledge. These open-ended credentials promote the lifelong learning and continuous skills enhancement that are so necessary to stay competitive in today's labour market.

Finally, there's no better way to ensure that young people are ready to hit the ground running in the job-market than by already having some experience in it. Through work-integrated learning, applied research or capstone projects, polytechnics and colleges provide an opportunity for students to get hands-on experience in real-world work environments and, ultimately, build the skills they will need to succeed in it.

Bringing students, post-secondary institutions and employers together has benefits on so many fronts – students obtain experience and industry not only gains access to top talent, but also access to top-of-the-line research capability at these institutions.

For example, new technologies and techniques are changing the ways video games, television and film are made. To keep on top of these shifts, Ontario's Sheridan College has partnered with SpinVFX, a global leader in visual effects production, to create the Screen Industries Research and Training Centre (SIRT). SIRT supports and fosters innovation in production and post-production for the film, television and gaming sectors.

SpinVFX has also created an internship program known as “Spinternships” where students and recent graduates are matched with mentors, provided training and given opportunities to familiarize themselves with the many aspects of the film industry.

There's a lot we can do to prepare Canadians for the jobs of the future and much of it means shifting how we think about education. On a global stage, Canada can and should take the lead by example.

When leaders converge on Charlevoix, let's show the G7 that if there's one pipeline we can agree on, it's the talent pipeline.

This article was co-written by Daniel Komesch, a senior policy analyst with Polytechnics Canada. Nobina Robinson is CEO of Polytechnics Canada, a national association representing the leading polytechnics and colleges in Canada. © Troy Media 2018

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