

Future Skills Centre Podcast

Episode 1: Developing Social and Emotional Skills in an Automated World

We've all heard it before: Technology is disrupting the world of work, eliminating 'low skill' jobs and harming the future of the trades. Daunting? Sure. But there's also growing demand for a specific type of worker. One with the ability to problem solve, lead, collaborate, communicate, and adapt to the ever-evolving world of work. In other words, there is a growing demand for strong social and emotional skills. The problem is, there is a gap between the demand for these skills and the skills Canadians acquire through education and training.

So, what exactly are these social and emotional skills? Why are they needed and why are we behind? What are our post-secondary systems doing to prepare future employees, and how do we ensure Canadians can 'keep up' with changing demands throughout their careers? In our first episode of Season 1 of the Future Skills Centre podcast, we start to answer these questions through conversations with Steve Higham (The Conference Board of Canada), Maria Giammarco (The Conference Board of Canada), Paul Brinkhurst (Futureworx), and Jennifer Adams (OECD).

Timestamps

04:17–09:05 Maria Giammarco & Stephen Higham

09:52–18:48 Paul Brinkhurst

20:08–26:57 Jennifer Adams

Links

Future Skills Centre and Conference Board of Canada links, such as recommended articles and webpages, social media handles, etc.

Future Skills Centre Homepage:

<https://fsc-ccf.ca/>

Future Skills Centre Twitter:

https://twitter.com/fsc_ccf_en

The Conference Board of Canada Homepage:

<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/>

The Conference Board of Canada Twitter:

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The Conference Board of Canada Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/ConferenceBoardofCanada/>

FSC–The Future is Social and Emotional (Online Experience):

<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/research/the-future-is-social-and-emotional>

FSC–The Future is Social and Emotional (Impact Paper):

<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=10628>

Karanga (Jennifer Adams is Chair):

<https://karanga.org/>

Futureworx (Paul Brinkhurst’s Organization):

<https://futureworx.ca/>

Transcript

(MUSIC PLAYS)

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

Hi, listeners, before we begin, we just want to acknowledge that this episode was recorded prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada. As you well know, this virus has had a dramatic effect on Canadian’s ability to go to work, and access training and education among so many other things. The conversations and opinions you will be hearing do not address COVID-related challenges specifically but are meant to provide instructive insights into how we can better prepare for the future of work more broadly. We hope you enjoy this episode.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

Welcome to the Future Skills Centre Podcast presented by The Conference Board of Canada. I’m your host, Heather McIntosh. As a member of the education and skills team at The Conference Board of Canada, my colleagues and I are constantly looking ahead, gaining and sharing insights into the labour market of today and the future. Together with our partners, we inform and support local approaches to skills development and employment training to help Canadians transition in the changing economy. The Future Skills Centre is a consortium made up of The Conference Board of Canada, Blueprint and Ryerson University.

Together, we’re building a centre that strives for research excellence and evidence generation. Like countries across the globe, Canada is facing wide-reaching demographic and technological changes that pose increasingly significant challenges to the world of work. In season one of the Future Skills Centre Podcast presented by The Conference Board of Canada, we will explore some of the most crucial emerging challenges to the future of work. Each episode we’ll unpack a unique challenge facing Canadians.

The most in demand skills for today’s and tomorrow’s labour market aren’t technical, they’re social and emotional. Academic research and industry surveys on skills needs indicate that social and emotional skills or SES, which are often referred to as human skills or soft skills are critical for employability and career success. I’m talking about skills like good communication, resilience, and problem solving, to name a few. But are Canada’s education and training systems doing enough to prepare students for work? The answer seems to be, “no”.

More and more employers require new hires who not only have specialized knowledge and technical skills, but who can also communicate their knowledge, work well with others and show strong emotional intelligence in a professional setting. The qualifications included in job listings across industries have begun to look increasingly

similar, seeking people that work effectively in teams, demonstrate leadership, think critically and adapt to changing and ambiguous circumstances. And yet when employers and hiring managers are asked to reflect on the skill sets of new hires, they repeatedly identify gaps, particularly regarding social and emotional skills.

So, as evidence continues to mount on the importance of social and emotional skills in the future of work, in this episode we try to unpack questions like, what exactly are social and emotional skills? Why are they needed? And why are we behind? What are our primary and post-secondary systems doing to prepare future employees? And how do we ensure Canadians can keep up with changing demands throughout their careers?

On this first episode of the Future Skills Centre Podcast, I'll talk to people doing research on social and emotional skills, a post-secondary practitioner running programs related to SES training, as well as someone with hands on experience in the Ontario education system, to try and understand the answers to these questions.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

Stephen Higham and Maria Giammarco are researchers on the education and skills team at The Conference Board of Canada and are currently running a multi-year research product on the training and development of social and emotional skills in the Canadian education system. This project is one of many that The Conference Board of Canada is conducting on behalf of the Future Skills Centre. While SES training is reflected throughout the K-12 curriculum, Stephen and Maria are interested in researching the opportunities and challenges of social and emotional skills training for recent graduates of post-secondary education. Here's Maria and Stephen.

STEPHEN HIGHAM:

We do a pretty good job of equipping people with some of these skills that we're calling social and emotional skills when they're in

kindergarten through to grade school and even in high school. When you're in kindergarten, you're taught how to share, how to play nice. Maybe even in high school, your ability, to work in a group, shows up on your report card. But by the time you get to university, we tend to devalue those sets of skills or at least assume that you're gaining them without actually measuring them.

And that's because they are really tough to assess and they're tough to measure and they're tough to teach to people but as we're seeing more and more businesses demand these skills, employers say that the graduates that they're seeing coming out of post-secondary institutions are lacking in some of those skills. And so, there's this apparent gap between the demand for those social and emotional skills and the skills that students are actually being equipped with in post-secondary.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

It's interesting that you meant employer's concern around recent grads not having social and emotional skills. I'm interested to know your thoughts on whose responsibility it is to train for these social and emotional skills? Post-secondary? Employers? What are your thoughts?

MARIA GIAMMARCO:

When we think about the responsibility to train and develop social and emotional skills, it's helpful to take a step back and think about learning from a lifelong perspective. So, as humans, we have the capacity to learn and to develop new skills throughout our lives. Traditionally, a lot of the research that's focused on social and emotional skills, development and training, has focused on childhood, right?

There's this old school notion that our brains are going through rapid development throughout our childhood, and then they sort of peter off as we become young adults. But the reality is that our brains remain plastic throughout our lives. And we have the capacity to learn new skills and we go through different developmental phases throughout our lives, in adolescents, in young adulthood and even through to older age.

And so we're almost doing a disservice to ourselves by forgetting about this capacity or dismissing this capacity throughout post-secondary training and into the workforce as well.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

So what I'm understanding is that it really is about employers and post-secondary working together as well as acknowledging that lifelong learning for social-emotional skills is part of human development.

MARIA GIAMMARCO:

Absolutely.

STEPHEN HIGHAM:

I think employers have a big role to play, but sometimes they don't actually see that role in themselves. When you hear an employer saying that graduates don't have good teamwork skills, it's like, "Well, give them an assignment at work that will put them in a team and give them that opportunity." The challenge there though is that how do you actually measure their development of those skills, and how do you assess it? Whether that's in post-secondary or on the employer side, we don't have those assessment frameworks really well-developed for social and emotional skills.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

Steve, that's fascinating. Why are you guys interested in studying this topic?

MARIA GIAMMARCO:

I would say that I'm emotionally invested in this line of work. I think it's extremely important and valuable. And in doing this work, what is really important to this project is when we look at social-emotional skills, we need to make sure that we're not leaving entire groups behind. We know that people with marginalized experiences or from vulnerable groups are hit the hardest by things like automation.

Jobs that rely heavily on these sort of technical job-specific skills are increasingly replaced by technology and are also the jobs that vulnerable groups tend to occupy the most. And these

groups also have the most difficulty accessing training and resources to develop their social, emotional skills for structural reasons. And these are big, important pieces of the puzzle that we need to address.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

What about you, Steve?

STEPHEN HIGHAM:

For me, it's just pure self-interest, and I want to make sure that I remain relevant before I'm replaced by an algorithm.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

So, Steve, are robots going to take all of our jobs?

STEPHEN HIGHAM:

Well, this quote from Yogi Berra comes to mind where he said, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." And I think that's especially true when you start talking about robotics and AI and other disruptive technologies, because of course the further out you try and forecast, the more variables come into play and the harder it is to actually say what's going to happen.

The only thing we really know for sure is that we're already seeing that there's more and more demand for social and emotional skills and the better we can develop and assess those skills, the better positioned we'll be for the future.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

To tackle this challenge, I spoke with Paul Brinkhurst, the innovations developer at Futureworx. Futureworx is a non-profit community-based organization, focused on employment, educational and training programs. It operates across Canada, helping job seekers and employers with services ranging from career planning and job searches to recruitment and HR.

I spoke with Paul about the role that social and emotional skills play in Futureworx programming and how this work led to the development of the Employability Skills Assessment Tool or ESAT.

The tool provides a framework and assessment methodology for the development of employability skills they've identified as most important to the Canadian labour market. So what is the importance of social and emotional skills?

PAUL BRINKHURST:

I think from our perspective, they're foundational skills for everything else. So when we talk about designing our programs, we talk of a skills pyramid with the technical skills you need to do the job, some essential skills that you need, the reading and writing and numeracy and so forth. But at the bottom of the pyramid are these behavioural skills that allow you to interact with other people effectively but they're also internal attributes - things like your adaptability and your accountability and your motivation. These are the things that allow you to be your best, when you're in an employment situation, and meet what are the driving expectations of an employer.

The problem is if we don't address these kinds of social and emotional skills, as part of training processes, then we're really leaving people without one of the legs that they need to stand on for success in the workplace. And often, unfortunately these skills don't get the same kind of attention. So we're actively trying to promote the inclusion of these skills in whatever type of training or education experience somebody has. If you've got time with somebody, often months, then you have the perfect opportunity to help them identify behaviours that are going to be problematic and modify those behaviours.

If you don't do that, then what happens, and what we've seen many times across the country when we've done ESAT training, is that somebody is taking a program, you can talk to the instructors, they know the two or three people in the program who are not going to be successful in the workplace but they're still going to graduate. And unfortunately, they just don't have anything in place to really deal with behaviours in an intentional way.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

So, why are social and emotional skills often undermined when thinking about training at large?

PAUL BRINKHURST:

I think there's lots of reasons for that. The difficulty is that dealing with social, emotional skills takes time. So it's difficult to add them on top of a program without actually adjusting the program to give instructors, and so forth, the opportunity to talk about the skills, but more importantly, to let people practice the skills. Now people are uncomfortable dealing with these skills, so people will say, "I don't have time to do those skills," or they'll question their ability to judge somebody's behaviours, even though that person is coming to the organization to prepare for employment. They might be concerned about offending the learner and then leaving the program.

The challenge is to set up the program so that these kinds of social and emotional skills are normalized. That people expect them to be talked about in the program. It's about setting up the environment for the program, so that they're part of the surroundings just as literacy or numeracy would be. So you can create a program where the person expects these things to happen, and then you can do it.

If you don't do that, if the person's coming in, they have no idea that behaviour is going to be an issue or talked about, and then you find that you have to address these, it's much more difficult and people get uncomfortable trying to do it. So I think people realize that they're important but they don't necessarily have the program structured in a way that makes it as easy as it could be to deal with these problems. And then (INAUDIBLE) tools, they're not necessarily getting training on how to do this kind of skill development and so forth.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

So while most people seem to agree that social and emotional skills are essential, the teaching, monitoring, and evaluation of these

skills in an applied setting can be challenging. The employability skills assessment tool as developed by Futureworx provides a solution.

The tool, known as ESAT, helps collect behavioural observations, learner self-assessments, and staff assessments, then provides custom programs for people to develop different strategies that are more aligned to the needs and expectations of the workplace. The ESAT can be used in programs as short as three weeks, where the aim is to create awareness and employability expectations, or to longer programs of six weeks or more where real behavioural change can be achieved. I asked Paul how the feedback collected through ESAT helps to normalize conversations about social and emotional skills within the Futureworx program.

PAUL BRINKHURST:

Well, I think people are often ashamed of what they perceive as a behavioural critique, I guess, somebody saying that a behaviour is potentially problematic in the workplace. We don't typically talk about these things even with the people who are most important in our lives, as we're embarrassed or afraid to hurt them.

So by normalizing, it just means recognizing that we all have social and emotional skill strengths, and we all have areas that we can work on, that the instructor or the facilitator in a program is no different in that respect from the people that they're training, that we all therefore can benefit from the opportunity to practise and improve these skills.

So instead of having it be an issue that, "Uh-oh, we've got to talk about this issue with someone," all of these skills are on the table, they're discussed as a routine part of the program. Everybody knows that they're gonna be working on areas that they need to work on, and it just becomes an expectation.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

And, Paul, could you elaborate more on what the assessment tool for the employability skills assessment tool really is?

PAUL BRINKHURST:

It's a formative assessment process. So you are asking the members of the team working with an individual to observe their behaviours as they go through the program. They're noting these behaviours, those observations are recorded in the system so that a case manager can identify patterns of behaviour and triggers. Those observations are also critically important because they're the basis for the assessment. So when it comes time to actually do the staff assessment, individual members of the team are asked to score the person for each skill based on their observations and based on the behavioural expectations that are defined.

And essentially what they're doing is assessing what is the risk of a behavioural issue arising for that person in that skill area that would be of concern to an employer? So each individual person is gonna do that staff assessment, and then they're gonna come together and they're going to look at the scores and the spread of scores and identify whether there's any biases. They're going to identify if there are outliers. And those outliers are really important because those could be specific behaviours that could get the person into trouble.

So what you're trying to do here in the staff assessment process is manage the subjectivity of the assessments. They are by their very nature is subjective, and you're not gonna get away from that, but you can use the different opinions that you see to better understand what's happening for that particular learner. Then, when you compare that final consensus with what the learner is saying they think their scores are, then you have a very interesting opportunity to compare the two scores.

The areas where you get the person significantly over scoring themselves, they think they're wonderful, and the team is suggesting there are problems, you have an opportunity there to explore how an employer's going to view that behaviour to use your observations to back that up. But likewise, if the learner is significantly underscoring themselves, you can use the same

process to help bolster their awareness of how they behave is actually maybe better than they think they are in terms of what an employer's looking for.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

Paul, in your opinion, is automation and technological disruption changing the demand for social-emotional skills?

PAUL BRINKHURST:

Yeah, I think it's pretty clear that it is. We're looking ahead. We can see a world where more and more tasks are automated—whether it's truck driving or waiting tables, wherever technology can do a job, I think it's likely an effort would be made to make that a reality. So the work that remains may be work that humans are more uniquely adapted to do. And the skills we need will tilt towards what the Royal Bank is calling 'human skill'.

So I think social and emotional skills will become increasingly important. They'll be critical and much higher number of jobs and not having strong social and emotional skills could be a more significant impediment in the future.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

Futureworx is a great example of an organization looking at social and emotional skills through the lens of lifelong learning. Sometimes it's difficult to reflect on your social and emotional skills as you grow older. It becomes something that you're just expected to have through interacting with peers in your day-to-day life. By explicitly acknowledging that everyone has strengths and weaknesses in these areas, even the educators, Futureworx normalizes the discussion of social, emotional skills across all stages of life. While it's true, that social and emotional skills are a greater focus of K-12 education relative to post-secondary, there is still much work to be done to support young students in developing a strong foundation of SES.

Jennifer Adams is a consultant who has been engaged in social and emotional skills development initiatives on a local and international level. She's been the Director of Education at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and past chair of the informal advisor group for the study on social and emotional skills with the OECD. Given her knowledge on social-emotional skills training globally, I decided to start by asking her how Canada compares on the international stage regarding the development of social-emotional skills.

JENNIFER ADAMS:

I think Canada's well positioned. We have a very professional teacher workforce, they're highly skilled and teaching these skills and embedding them into the everyday work that happens in the classroom, I think Canada's well positioned to be doing that.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

Jennifer, you mentioned that you were the Director of Education for an Ottawa District School Board. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on the importance of social and emotional skills development throughout K-12 learning?

JENNIFER ADAMS:

Yeah, that's an interesting question because I think teachers intuitively have always known that they are responsible for helping the whole child, not just in particular content areas, but developing as children and into adolescence and well into adulthood. We don't need to have a separate curriculum to teach these skills. We just need to be intentional and purposeful.

And we're very fortunate in the province of Ontario. We have a curriculum that for teachers in each of the grade levels in each of the subject areas, there's an upfront piece of the curriculum that describes many of these skills, whether it's problem solving or collaboration or communication or developing empathy for others, those types of skills are all acknowledged at the front of the curriculum. So in a sense, it gives our teachers permission and actually a responsibility to be helping students develop those skills.

So we're very careful to say that, you know, we don't do reading, writing and math from Monday to Thursday. And then on Friday we teach social-emotional skills. It's every day, across all the different subject areas and obviously with higher levels of complexity as the children get older. So again, it's something that it's a collective responsibility. It's something that binds us together in the education system in the sense that we all have the opportunity to help students develop those skills, as they're going through the education system.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

Jennifer, can you tell me more about your thoughts on the role of employers in social and emotional skills development?

JENNIFER ADAMS:

Yes. There's been some great work done here in Canada and I'll give one example. RBC has done some really interesting reports on future skills and what are the kinds of things they've certainly highlighted the need for the development of social-emotional skills in children and in their employees. So that's one example of a corporate partner that is really looking at: what are the kinds of skills that we need to be doing, and how do they play out another organization?

I think many of the listeners will have heard of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. And of course, the sustainable development goal number four is quality education. And there are networks, both post-secondary networks in Canada and business networks that are talking about how can we solve the problems, those 17 goals that are saying these are the big challenges that need to be faced by 2030. And probably more importantly, if these are the big challenges, what are the skills that will be needed to be able to solve these big challenges? And if they have the skills to solve those big challenges, they'll be able to solve the everyday, small challenges that individuals face in their personal lives and in their business lives and in their community lives.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

I'd love your thoughts on the influence of technological disruption, on the demand of social, emotional skills in the workforce.

JENNIFER ADAMS:

Yeah, that's a good question. And like everything there's advantages to those technological disruptions and there's disadvantages.

I think one of the advantages is that just amplification and the ability to share information and share ideas and have platforms that allow for those kinds of communications. So it's a way of really making sure that awareness globally takes place and there's all sorts of tools that are available to help classroom teachers embed those kinds of things into their classrooms. So up from a very macro level at the global level, right down into the classroom technology can play a huge beneficial role.

Some of the challenges, I think again, as a parent, the amount of time that children and young adults and older adults, like myself, spend on our screens where we're not interacting and we're not necessarily building the types of social and emotional skills because we're spending so much time. So, how do we take the advantages of the technological disruptors and benefit from those? And how do we think carefully about the world that our young adults are going into now, and try to make sure that they have the skills to be able to better manage their lives in a world that's very, very connected?

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

You touched on something really interesting, which was, I believe, alluding to this growing momentum around the interest of social-emotional skills and learning, given the longevity of your career, I'm interested to hear a reflection from you on how interest or momentum has waxed or waned over the years.

JENNIFER ADAMS:

Yeah, I think what's the interesting thing is, that we started off, I look back to 10 or 15 years ago, and we really took a close look at pedagogical practices in the classroom. And many of us will

remember, you look back a number of years and the typical situation when you walked in a classroom was you had a teacher at the front of the room and you had children or young adults sitting in separate desks.

And what we have done a really good job in education in Canada doing is really evolving what teaching and learning looks like. And so, when you walk into our classrooms now, typically you see groups of students working together. You see a teacher acting as a facilitator. With that type of pedagogy, it is a great way of linking children to the content or the curriculum area but what it's doing at the same time is it's developing those social-emotional skills.

Children are problem solving. They're not just taking and digesting and swallowing the content. They're actually thinking of the content. So, I think it's been a natural progression and we're in a good place to be moving forward.

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

Jennifer, with your expertise and rich career in education and social-emotional learning, what is your vision for social-emotional learning in the future?

JENNIFER ADAMS:

That's a good question and I really like how we're landing in Canada with this concept of future skills. And, of course, the federal government has put funding out there to create a future skills centre and I think it's a really good opportunity in a country where the education system is federated, in the sense that it's the provincial responsibilities. I think, there's a great opportunity to really be thinking up at that federal level, nationwide, as provinces look at their curriculum and the practices in their classrooms and their practices in their post-secondary institutions. It's really an opportunity to be looking at future skills.

What are the skills that all of our students, regardless of the disciplines that they're going in and their career paths, what are the skills that they would like to have? And there's a natural...

when we look at future skills, it will always include social-emotional skills because that's the world that we live in now.

(MUSIC PLAYS)

HEATHER MCINTOSH:

A little-known Greek philosopher once said, "That the only constant in life is change." 2,500 years later, nothing has changed. But with such rapid technological economic and demographic shifts occurring in Canada today, and in the days to come, it can be comforting to think that our most future-proof and important skills will be our social and emotional skills. Our ability to communicate and cooperate with one another. This and more is discussed in a recent paper published by The Conference Board of Canada, about social and emotional skills, titled 'The Future is Social and Emotional: Evolving Skills Needs in the 21st Century'.

This paper is a part of a series of outputs related to the Future Skills Centre research project on social and emotional skills that Stephen and Maria were talking about earlier in the episode which you can access free of charge at conferenceboard.ca/thefutureskillscentre.

One key finding of the paper is that as we learn more and more about the role of social and emotional skills in the future of work, it has become increasingly apparent that we need to consider the unique needs of vulnerable individuals and groups who are typically left behind in the labour market. The growing demand for social and emotional skills could exacerbate existing social inequalities since vulnerable groups tend to face the most systemic barriers to accessing the types of training, resources and other opportunities that cultivate SES, improve labour market participation and lead to career success.

Given the unique disadvantages faced by vulnerable groups when it comes to SES, we have to be careful in our evaluation and perspectives. We must ensure that our language and treatment of SES does not further marginalize

already vulnerable groups. That's why the next episode of the Future Skills Centre podcast will be about the incorporation of vulnerable groups into the Canadian labour market. I'll be speaking to a number of experts about our current understandings of the problems and the possible future solutions to making Canada a more diverse and inclusive economy.

Until then, if you're enjoying the podcast, why not share it with a friend or colleague who would enjoy it too? You can subscribe through your favourite podcast app. Thanks for listening and let's keep working toward a better future for all Canadians.

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The Future Skills Centre podcast is presented by The Conference Board of Canada and hosted by me, Heather McIntosh. It is produced by Noah Sniderman and Kevin O'Meara.

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