

The Future Skills Podcast

Season 4: Episode 5 Insights from Magnet Network Live

In this bonus episode of the Future Skills Podcast, new host Jeremy Strachan dives into highlights from the Magnet Network Live event held in Toronto in October 2024, where leaders gathered to address Canada's talent, training, and skills challenges. The episode features insights on AI, productivity, and Canada's "12/21 problem," where outdated learning models fall short in a 21st-century workforce. Key discussions focus on the need for risk-taking in business, the importance of social and emotional skills, and the critical role of trust in the workplace. Strachan also explores immigration's role in Canada's future, barriers faced by international students, and the impact of the Future Skills Centre's efforts to foster an inclusive economy through innovative partnerships and initiatives across Canada.

Guests

Noel Baldwin, Executive Director of the Future Skills Centre
Michael Burt, Vice President of the Conference Board of Canada
Mark Patterson, Executive Director of Magnet
Emily Madden, Senior Director of Magnet
Ashok Kasilingam, Executive Director of M2M Tech
Erin Rose, Senior Research Associate, Conference Board of Canada

Host

Jeremy Strachan, Senior Research Associate, Conference Board of Canada

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:

<https://twitter.com/ConfBoardofCda>

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

Transcript

Emily Madden:

Ok. Welcome to Magnet Network Live!

Jeremy Strachan:

Magnet Network Live was a one-of-a-kind event that happened in October 2024 in Toronto's Distillery District, where an invite-only crowd of thought leaders, decision-makers, and key players came together to work through the toughest problems facing Canada's talent, training, and skills development sector. This wasn't an ordinary conference, and that was by design: For two days, and spread across multiple historic venues, Magnet Network Live was meant to get people talking to each other - not just to sit and listen. I came to Toronto to hear what the most important voices in workforce development and learning wanted to say, and to let you, the listener, have a chance to experience what I did. I'm Jeremy Strachan, a Senior Research Associate at the Conference Board of Canada, and your new host of the Future Skills Podcast. I'm excited to present this bonus episode of Season Four. Come on, let's get into it.

As we wind up this season of the Future Skills podcast, you're probably hearing something different: New theme (sort of); new host; and a new format. This bonus episode is meant to bring season four to an end, and to bridge us across to what we have in store for next season on the podcast: More insights into the future of work in Canada, more diverse perspectives, and more stories of what matters most to Canadians when it comes to learning and working. In this episode of the podcast, I'm going to synthesize some of the key themes I heard at Magnet Network Live, or MNL, and tell you some of the really compelling stories that were shared in the sessions. It's no surprise that AI and the implications on what it means to not only work and learn, but to be human, was a key theme. Canada's lagging productivity was another.

As Mike Burt, Vice President of the Conference Board of Canada, said in his talk on business investment and risk, Canadian productivity has stood still.

Mike Burt:

Seven years ago; what were you guys doing seven years ago? Put yourself in that mindset. I'm sure you were doing something different than what you are today. If you look at statistics, Canada's productivity - which is output per hour worked - is the same today as it was in 2017. So, we have stood still for seven years. And that's why the Bank of Canada was saying, let's hit the emergency button; we need to do something about this.

In the US, for every hour worked, they produce 30 per cent more than we do here. Thirty per cent. And that gap is getting bigger every month, because they're growing, and we're not.

Jeremy:

We'll hear more from Mike later in the episode, along with Noel Baldwin, Executive Director of the Future Skills Centre, about why we need to solve this problem and some of ways we're going about it. We'll also hear from Magnet's Executive Director Mark Patterson and Senior Director (and emcee) Emily Madden on how bringing people together this way might accelerate some of those solutions. Later, I'm going to introduce you to my colleague Erin Rose from the Conference Board. She'll talk about two projects we've been conducting on behalf of the Future Skills Centre that relate to some of the main themes I heard coming out of Magnet Network Live - in particular, on how human skills are becoming more important, and on how immigration and international education will continue to impact Canada's future workforce needs.

Some of these conversations were recorded live and in the moment, so you'll hear some of background ambience.

Think about how much our world has changed since 2017. COVID. Remote work. AI. A drive for more inclusive workplaces. The growing demand for social and emotional skills at work. We're faced with a dilemma. As Michael Crowe, Vice President Academic at Bow Valley College said in his talk at Magnet, it's the "12/21" problem. We're using, literally, a learning paradigm that originated in the 12th century to equip talent entering a 21st-century labour market, with 21st-century problems. That's one of the big takeaways I heard from the event: How learning, training, and labour market demands are out of sync, and we aren't equipping the workforce of today and tomorrow with the right skills.

I caught up with Noel Baldwin, the Executive Director of the Future Skills Centre. FSC partnered with Magnet to curate sessions on Canada's talent dilemma, why trust in the workplace is more important than ever, and how immigration is Canada's future. I asked Noel to tell me about the nature of the collaboration.

Noel Baldwin:

So Magnet is one of our really key partners at FSC. They've been there since the beginning. They do a lot of work, with us and with a number of our project partners on building digital platforms for connecting employers and job seekers for collaboration in and across sectors, for example, with sector organizations, sector councils.

So the event is a really great opportunity for FSC to connect both with people we're already working with, but then people who are in Magnet's much broader network, who are focused on skills and workforce development issues for the future.

Jeremy:

I asked Noel how all the sessions all came together.

Noel:

We worked with Magnet to try to identify some of the themes that they wanted to speak to that are really connected to the way that FSC has been working. So, for example, we sponsored Daniel Tisch from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce and his talk about trust and how important trust is in developing partnerships that are effective.

That's been a big part of the way that FSC has worked. I mean, right from the beginning, it's a consortium model. So you've got partners on the ground from day one, but then in order to be a pan-Canadian organization, we've had to figure out how we can work with people all across the country. And a big part of that is to literally, physically meet them where they are, but also to start from the premise that their needs or their challenges are what we're trying to solve, and not our agenda that we're trying to take across the country.

So if you think about that, that trust piece is super important. The session that we did on shifts in sectors and, and responses to those, I mean, that's defined almost the entirety of FSC's existence, right? I mean, somebody put "Future" in the name, but I don't think they expected a pandemic, right?

So, I mean, we've been shifting all along with our partners in different economic sectors and, and different communities across the country. So that, that was another natural fit as we looked at the themes that Magnet wanted to treat and the ones that aligned with our work and mission.

Jeremy:

I wanted to find out about what FSC's priority areas would be in the future. They've currently been focused on issues related to inclusion, pathways to employment, automation and tech, sustainability, and small to medium enterprise.

Noel:

So, as you pointed out, we've had five priority areas of focus. We think about two of them as being drivers that we may not have a lot of direct control over. Climate, the impact of climate change and climate change policy, and tech, AI, and automation. Those are things that are global phenomena, but they're going to continue to have impacts on the Canadian labour market.

There's two areas that we think of as levers that we can pull on. One is that pathways to jobs, that's supporting infrastructure for people to navigate a really changing labour market and economy, as well as a focus on Canada's small- and medium-sized enterprises, which make up a really big part of our economy in terms of employment and need some support to navigate their own skill and talent needs. And that's in service of this kind of broader objective around an inclusive economy where everyone has the opportunity for prosperity.

The main way that we're going to try to action those things, we're going to continue to work with some of our existing partners to scale initiatives that have shown promise to have impact for Canadians. And we will actually be opening ourselves up to some new initiatives, new ideas. So, we'll open a couple of calls for proposals that will be trying to see the next generation of projects that can scale in the next couple of years down the road.

Jeremy:

The impact of Artificial Intelligence on work is evolving rapidly. Beyond GPTs and personalized assistants, AI has forced us to consider some of the fundamental aspects of what it means to be at work. Dr. Vivien Ming is a theoretical neuroscientist and CEO of Socos Labs, a tech and innovation entrepreneur, and one of the most influential thinkers on AI. Dr. Ming delivered the keynote address, which drew on 25 years of experience in working with and researching AI and human potential.

She gave us an example of how the exponential growth of scientific research papers in the last 40 years has resulted not in innovation, but a re-amplification of mainstream authors and ideas, and a sidelining of new perspectives in the scientific community. The parallels with large language models are pretty clear.

But one of the main points of her talk was that if all we're trying to leverage from AI is efficiency, we're "stealing from our future." But Dr. Ming also talked about the ways AI can make us not just more productive, but innovative: To make teams work better together and to achieve more. The smartest teams, she said, were small, diverse, and flat; teams where different people with different backgrounds and experiences collaborate. She talked about a particular AI she used that incentivized teams to explore, and not to worry about making mistakes.

Ashok Kasilingam is the executive director of M2M Tech, an AI upskilling and workforce development firm in British Columbia. I asked him about what resonated with him about Dr. Ming's keynote.

Ashok:

I was really impressed to be part of this conference, first of all, and the keynote speaker, Dr. Ming. I was actually blown away by the, by the speech Dr. Ming gave. And one of the things which she emphasized on is having this spark within the team once you have your diverse group, getting their diverse opinion brings automatically a spark, energy into the team. So, try that out. She touched upon a lot of different technical topics, and she expressed a lot of work, what she does with a lot of different organizations like Amazon, Facebook, and Google. So it was really thought-provoking and interesting to listen to these stories.

Jeremy:

Dr. Ming's insights and Ashok's reflections highlight the immense potential of AI to foster innovation and collaboration through diverse teams. But beyond just discussions on AI's impact, this event was designed to bring people together, to create real connections that could

drive lasting change. It's one thing to hear about the power of AI in theory, but another to experience firsthand how ideas and people can intersect and spark meaningful impact.

Mark Patterson and Emily Madden from Magnet expanded on this idea, emphasizing how connecting people and ideas in-person can spark innovation:

Mark:

So when you do an event like this, there's obviously a lot of things you can evaluate and you know, how did the event go, et cetera. And so obviously we're interested in that. But I think for me, the, um, if we were able to, you know, in six months or a year to find out that people met at this event, created a project and that had impact in helping in workforce economic development, the Canadian labour market, that would be success for us. So we're really excited about people connecting and making a difference in the future.

Emily:

Yeah, I would say Magnet is in the business of connecting things, right? Like, we think a lot about this in, from a technology perspective, from a digital perspective. We think about integrations and how things that aren't necessarily inherently connected could be connected to create something innovative.

Like, that's what we do. So this is really a live instantiation of what we've been doing, and we're taking a slightly different approach than I think, um, we're all talking about right now. You know, the discourse is around the sort of digital first, everybody's talking about AI, and we're kind of taking a step back and we're taking this event from a human perspective of look at how connecting all of these different thinkers and industries together, is really, you know, potentially seeding some really important innovations and impact in our ecosystem. I think that's really what we're seeing here.

Jeremy:

All throughout the event, we heard about why human skills are going to be critical in an AI-saturated workforce. The Future Skills Centre has done a ton of research on this – what we've been calling social and emotional skills – and for the past several years, the Conference Board has been leading on this work. Just like how I heard about it at Magnet Network Live, we heard that trust has become a pillar for human connection in the workplace with AI and automation technologies becoming ever-present.

Let's step away from Magnet Network Live so I can introduce you to my colleague, Erin Rose. She's a Senior Research Associate at the Conference Board of Canada

Over the past year, Erin's lead a project that's looked into the perspectives of Canadian employers on social and emotional skills in the workplace, and why they matter. Erin, what did you hear from your interviews when it comes to recruiting talent for these kinds of skills?

Erin:

So, we talked to employers in knowledge-based organizations across Canada, and nearly all of them said that social and emotional skills are as important, if not more important, than technical skills for success in their organization. And we saw the same things when we looked at job postings data from across the country: a clear and growing demand for social and emotional skills in knowledge-based roles. And so some of the key social and emotional skills employers are looking for include things like communication, collaboration, listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence. Some of these skills, like communication, aren't necessarily new, but they're being applied in new ways, as organizations embrace remote and hybrid work.

Empathy and emotional intelligence, on the other hand, are newer priorities. So, with the fast pace of technological change, and an increasing focus on workplace mental health, employers are really looking for people who

bring empathy and emotional intelligence into the workplace. And these traits help people communicate better, help managers manage change effectively, and create a high-trust environment where everyone can thrive in the workplace.

Jeremy:

Can I ask you a little bit there about trust? We heard a lot about trust at Magnet Network Live. Did you have any thoughts when it comes to that piece in the workplace? The human connection?

Erin:

Yeah, so I think that goes back again to emotional intelligence and empathy that employers are looking for. I think when there's an increasing focus on mental health in the workplace, and a recognition that the personal and the professional intersect. I think when employees feel that they can bring that side of themselves to the workplace, and there's the trust there, that's not going to be used against them in the workplace. That allows them really to do their best work.

Jeremy:

Daniel Tisch, CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, spoke about trust at a one of the Future Skills Centre's curated sessions. To quote him, "the stakes are high; trust is low." Our embrace of technologies has taken us from adopting and using the Internet, to migrating to vast social media networks, and now to AI. And as Daniel commented, Canadians don't trust AI right now. But he's optimistic: He said in his talk that he believes in the promise of AI to make workers more valued. To quote him, "there is no productivity that we get from AI unless there is trust."

Here is Emily and Mark from Magnet picking up on that.

Emily:

This has been a big theme, a massive undercurrent. Even in a lot of the side conversations and networking I've been having is, you know, how do you build trust? Why is

trust important? There's so much stuff that AI can do, but there's so much stuff that AI can't do, right? That it requires humans to do so.

And trust is a fundamental part of how we interact with each other. So how you build those things across organizations. But we've created an environment that is relaxed and feeling like you can start to build those things in a real way and just being able to have honest, open conversations in a relaxed, non-performative way is one of those pieces that I think really does seed trust and really is important for this kind of discourse and where we are right now. So I would agree with you completely.

Mark:

I think there's a couple of things to build to have impact at like, a systems level. You have to have a common shared vision. You have to buy into an idea that's bigger than your own individual organization. And to do that, you have to have trust in the other organizations that you're participating with, right?

So you're subsuming your own self-interest for a greater good. So that's to me where trust comes in. It becomes really important when we're trying to achieve or deal with a crisis of, you know, we all saw in COVID, everybody came to action, you know, lowered their own self-interest because there was a higher calling.

And I think we're at a time, for example, with AI, where we need that kind of action, where we need to bring collective thought about how we're going to deal with the technology for both its promise, but also, its potential negative impacts. And so I think, you know, it's a period where trust is going to be really important and, one of the reasons that we were thinking about having this event is bringing people together, making these connections, allowing them to build trust in a cool, relaxed, vibing environment.

Jeremy:

If trust is one of the emergent paradigms for the future of work, how will that factor in the risks we're willing to take? Earlier we heard Mike Burt from the Conference Board who told us that our

productivity has remained stagnant since 2017, resulting in Canada's poor growth compared to our G7 peers. The usual explanations for this, as we noted in a report on the productivity problem last August, are threefold: our industrial structure, a decline in business-level innovation, and a lacklustre investment in Canadian start-ups and what has been called "business dynamism." But there is a missing piece – skills shortages contribute to bottlenecks which translates into lower productivity. I managed to catch up with Mike before his fireside chat with Candice Frost, CEO of Disco, in a session titled "Investment & Learning Tango."

Mike Burt:

Really what I want to talk about is the productivity crisis we have here in Canada, and how the skills ecosystem can work to address it. I can give you some stats, but the truth is that Canada's productivity story is pretty concerning. And where we're at, a big part of the story is a lack of investment from Canadian businesses. Now there's a whole array of things that aren't related to labour policy that might influence that, but if you look at the skills ecosystem, there's a couple things we can do.

One would be looking at the culture around Canada we have around risk aversion. So even starting at the K through 12 level – how do we train Canadian people, citizens, as they go through the formal education system, have a different approach, different attitudes about risk – healthier attitudes about risk. Because ultimately, if we don't take those risks, we're going to continue to see weak technology adoption and limited growth here. So that's one thing.

I'd say another thing is around really understanding what business needs are around training. Businesses in Canada underinvest in training. There's no other way to put it. At best we're middle of the pack. When you look at OECD, depending on the measures you look at, we're actually lagging averages. And, so why is that? I think part of the story is around how we package up educational or continuing education or continuing education programs in Canada—making sure that they're training for the right

skills that are cost effective, they have the right timings. So it's not a three year program; it's maybe a three week program really targeting the skills that employers need. So those are two things we can do.

Jeremy:

I asked Mike to reflect on that "12/21" problem we heard about. We had to step outside, because the band was about to start their soundcheck.

Mike:

Basically, in any organization, any system, you're going to have – I'm going to call it inertia around how we currently do things. You do things the way you do them because you've always done them that way. And I think that's the case certainly with our education system. It's not that anyone's deliberately saying 'we need to do it this way.' The issue is you need to build that consensus, that idea that maybe the way we're doing it is not the best way or the right way, and start to move towards a different new norm. And these things take time. It takes time for that to happen. And I think the example with Bow Valley who we heard from yesterday was really getting at that – whereas you're starting to see some institutions step forward and say, "Hey, maybe we can do this differently." Right? And it may take ten or twenty years to change a hundred-year-old system, or a multi-hundred-year-old system, but I think over time we will get there.

Jeremy:

One of the other sessions presented in partnership with the Future Skills Centre was a "Vibe Check" on how immigration is Canada's future. As demographic challenges and workforce shortages intensify, immigration remains the cornerstone of Canada's future prosperity—but negative perceptions and outdated thinking persist. This was a session that was meant to challenge these narratives and explore how immigration policies, workforce integration, and community strategies can be reimagined to ensure immigrants play a central role in shaping Canada's future.

Let's step away from event again for a second.

I want to bring back Erin Rose, my colleague at the Conference Board of Canada. In addition to the project she was leading on social and emotional skills, she's also been leading a project on the pathways from campus to career for international students in Ontario and BC colleges. So tell us about the project and why it's important right now.

Erin:

International students, particularly those who stay in Canada after graduation, are an important part of Canada's skilled workforce. But to truly benefit from the talent that they bring, and from the investment that Canada makes in their education, we need to provide them with the support that they need to succeed, both during their studies, and after graduation.

And part of this is about ensuring that they can transition smoothly to the job market. But what we're seeing now is that after graduation, many international students, like other newcomers to Canada, are struggling to find jobs in their fields after graduation, and they're often earning less than graduates who were born in Canada.

So the goal of this project was to dive deeper into how international college students use employment supports on campus, and how these supports can be improved to help achieve better employment outcomes.

Jeremy:

So what have you learned so far? What are some of the key insights from your research?

Erin:

Sure, so we focused this research on international students who were studying at the college level in Ontario and British Columbia. In total, we surveyed a thousand students and recent graduates. We did forty follow-up interviews with them, and we also spoke with college staff who work in career services, international student services, and Work Integrated Learning.

But we found that international students are looking for support on a wide variety of issues. Things like resume writing, improving their interview skills, and networking are some of the main ones. But they also bring up larger challenges like discrimination in the labour market, or working conditions, and limited job opportunities.

On the positive side, we found that international students who used career services and who participate in Work Integrated Learning report better employment outcomes. They are more likely to have Canadian work experience, feel more satisfied with their jobs, and report better alignment with their field of study and career goals.

But we also found that a quarter of international students and graduates aren't using these supports. And sometimes that's because they don't know what's available to them, or they can't find the time to attend to these services. But also, Work Integrated Learning for international students can feel financially risky, and transportation to these placements can be a barrier as well.

Of course, domestic students can struggle with some of these barriers that international students often have fewer financial resources and unique financial and settlement pressures that make it even tougher for them.

Jeremy:

It was great to be back in Toronto, my old stomping grounds, where I lived for close to 20 years. Walking around the Distillery District in the fall, feeling the leaves crunching underfoot over those unique cobblestone lanes was something else—but I've never quite experienced it like this and never would have expected that an event like this would be what brought me home.

As I left the event, feeling inspired by the innovative approaches and dedicated voices addressing our workforce challenges, I couldn't help but think about the broader impact of these efforts.

Noel Baldwin, Executive Director of the Future Skills Centre, who has been deeply involved in this work, shared the remarkable scope of what's been achieved and the vision for where we're headed next.

Noel:

So, I mean, look, we've been at this work now for a little more than five years. In that time, we've created nearly 400 partnerships, either for research or innovation pilot projects. Through the initiatives and partnerships we've had, more than 85,000 people have had access to either direct training or employment opportunities. An order of magnitude more than that have had access to resources that are helping them understand the labour market, navigate it, get support that they may need that's sort of beyond just the training itself. And we've done that in every province and territory. We've been able to create really fruitful partnerships with a number of provincial and territorial governments.

So FSC's impact has been really broad. I think we've created an organization that has a high degree of trust in the skills development space that we're working in; that has the confidence of our funder and a number of the other governments across the country. And now where we're trying to go is to really deepen that impact. To go further so that as the world around us keeps changing really quickly, Canadians know that they're going to have support, and they're going to have people who are trying to think about where the puck's going, and then be there alongside them as a supporting partner in trying to get there.

Jeremy:

Thanks again for joining for this bonus episode of the Future Skills Podcast. Much of this episode's audio was captured at the Magnet Network Live event in Toronto, Ontario. Thanks to Magnet for having me. I'd like to thank all my guests today for their valuable insights. You can hear all four seasons of the Future Skills Podcast on your favourite podcast app. Give us a follow if you haven't already, to stay tuned for the next season. This episode was produced, edited and hosted by me, Jeremy Strachan. Sound design also by yours truly. Thanks for listening.

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