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CANADA'S PROBLEM ISN'T JUST PRODUCING TALENT. IT'S DEPLOYING IT.

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Across Canada's biggest economic priorities—housing, energy, defence, artificial intelligence—the issue isn't simply the availability of talent. It's how effectively companies can absorb, develop, and deploy it at the speed and scale these priorities require.

Shortages are real. But how companies define roles, hire, and invest in training matters just as much as how much talent we produce.

In theory, Canada has many of the right ingredients: a well-educated workforce, strong research capacity, and a steady pipeline of graduates. In practice, the translation from talent to economic value is uneven and slow. Too much is lost between producing talent and deploying it effectively.

Part of the issue lies in how companies are structured. Many are set up to hire finished talent rather than develop it internally. That may be efficient in the short term, but it limits their ability to scale. Training is still too often treated as a cost rather than a core capability, and partnerships with post-secondary institutions are often transactional or disconnected from operational needs.

The result: systems that produce talent, but insufficient capacity to absorb and deploy it.

You can see this in construction. Canada needs more people in the skilled trades, but meeting that need depends on more than supply: it requires companies that can integrate and train new entrants, adopt modern building methods, and organize work to improve productivity.

Innovations in modular construction and digital project management can improve efficiency, but only for companies that invest in them.

On most job sites, new workers require significant on-the-job training and supervision. Companies like PCL Constructors are investing more deliberately in training through apprenticeships, on-the-job learning, and college partnerships. But many companies, especially small and medium-sized ones, lack the capacity to deliver that training at scale. Those that do, can do more with the same workforce; those that don't, remain constrained even when workers are available.

In the energy sector, progress depends on investment, but also on whether companies can mobilize specialized talent across regions, coordinate with partners, and deliver projects on tight timelines. This affects technology, generation, and infrastructure companies across the sector, from GE Vernova and Ontario Power Generation to Enbridge, where execution depends on having specialized talent in place at the right stages of large, multi-partner projects.

A similar dynamic is playing out in mining, where companies like Teck and Cameco operate capital-intensive projects that rely on deploying specialized talent across regions and partners.

A related challenge is emerging in defence, where scaling domestic capability will depend not just on procurement, but on whether our armed forces and the defence industry can build and mobilize the skilled workforce needed to design, build, and sustain advanced systems across regions, suppliers, and coordinated initiatives.

In tech and artificial intelligence, the gap is adoption—namely companies' ability to integrate AI into workflows, train their workforce, and apply it across operations. Even large companies, including RBC, are still working to embed AI tools into daily operations.

In each case, the issue isn't simply talent supply. It's how effectively talent is absorbed and deployed within companies.

Across sectors, companies that embed training and build sustained partnerships with post-secondary institutions are still the exception, not the norm. Which means success still depends on whether companies choose to invest in and engage with these systems.

This is where company-level solutions reach their limits and where the broader workforce system, including post-secondary education, becomes part of the solution. Colleges, polytechnics, and universities are no longer a standalone sector responsible for producing talent. They're part of the systems that determine how talent is deployed: through work-integrated learning, continuing education, applied research, credential design, and employer partnerships.

When those connections are strong, talent moves more quickly from education to application. When they're weak, the system stalls.

The challenge is that our systems aren't consistently set up to support this kind of behaviour. Connections between companies and post-secondary institutions are often fragmented or difficult to navigate, making sustained employer engagement harder.

That's where both industry and policy need to shift. If companies want post-secondary systems that deliver talent more effectively, they need to engage more deeply in how those systems are designed and delivered.

That means treating talent development as a core operational capability, not something outsourced. It means redesigning roles and partnering with post-secondary institutions to build internal training capacity, and shifting from competing for talent to helping grow it.

Policy frameworks need to reinforce this shift by making it easier for companies to engage and ensuring funding incentivizes stronger, sustained employer–institution partnerships.

More funding, on its own, won't fix this.

This is the shift Canada needs to make. If Canada wants to deliver on its economic priorities, it needs to focus not just on how talent is produced, but on how it's developed and deployed, starting with how companies build and use it.

Talent only matters if it's put to work.

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