THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

FROM LEGO MANUALS TO OPERATING ROOMS: DEFINING COMMUNICATION FOR CANADA'S WORKFORCE

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When a six-year-old opens a LEGO set, they're holding a masterclass in visual communication in their hands. That same kind of wordless clarity keeps a SickKids surgical team aligned or a CAE flight simulator safe under pressure. Whether it's guiding a child as they build an airplane out of plastic blocks or coordinating professionals in high-stakes environments, this is communication as design: tested, refined, and built to work without words.

Still, too many students are taught communication primarily as writing and presentation. The result is a major gap between the skills graduates leave with and the competencies industry depends on to drive safety, innovation, and user experience.

Communication consistently ranks as one of the top employability skills in every labour market report in Canada: insert colourful word cloud here. But when you dig deeper, a pattern emerges: few go on to define what "communication" means in specific job contexts.

If communication truly is the currency of the future of work, we need to move beyond word clouds and generic lists. What does it actually look like on the job, and how do we deliberately train for it? In reality, "communication skills" are rarely one-size-fits-all. Across sectors, they emerge as distinct, discipline-specific competencies that share one thing in common: they're designed, tested, and tied to outcomes.

THREE STAND OUT:

VISUAL & NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In some industries, words are the least effective way to communicate. LEGO's Building Instruction Designers, IKEA's Assembly Manual teams, and Toronto-based Spin Master all rely on purely visual storytelling to guide users through complex tasks without a single line of text.

Bombardier's aircraft maintenance manuals use the same principle at a different scale, with diagram-heavy guides that allow technicians across the globe to maintain safety regardless of language. Even Shopify's point-of-sale hardware onboarding relies on visual sequencing, echoing Apple's approach to packaging: remove words, remove friction.

THE COMPETENCY: Empathy-driven visual communication that anticipates errors and creates universal understanding without language.

DIGITAL & INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATION

In the digital economy, communication is no longer static: it's interactive. Nintendo's tutorial UX designers craft in-game onboarding experiences that teach without overwhelming. Duolingo turns communication into a feedback loop, using micro-interactions and gamification to keep users engaged. Vancouver-based Hootsuite relies on similar principles in its in-app onboarding flows, using subtle cues to guide behavior for a global user base.

RBC – along with Canada's broader financial sector – faces the same challenge: turning complex financial transactions into simple, intuitive user journeys. Even CBC Kids Digital builds communication as interaction, using game mechanics to teach children through non-verbal cues.

THE COMPETENCY: Designing adaptive, feedback-driven communication that guides users dynamically and intuitively.

COMMUNICATION FOR SAFETY, QUALITY & INNOVATION

In high-stakes environments, communication isn't a soft skill: it's a safety system. At SickKids and Toronto General Hospital, surgical teams use closed-loop communication protocols to prevent errors and save lives. Montreal-based CAE builds those same competencies into aviation training, where clarity under stress is non-negotiable.

Bruce Power and Canadian Nuclear Laboratories embed standardized hand-off and escalation practices into daily operations, where a single miscommunication could impact safety on a massive scale. Globally, NASA Mission Control and Boeing manufacturing use scripted, structured communication to ensure precision, while Toyota's iconic "Andon Cord" system turns rapid, visual communication into a tool for safety and continuous innovation.

THE COMPETENCY: Structured, practiced communication protocols that directly influence safety, quality control, and iterative improvement.

STRENGTHENING THE BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION CONNECTION

Communication skills will continue to top every labour market report. Without defining them in practical terms, Canada turns that headline into a hollow buzzword. The gap isn't just academic: it's economic. Communication is the infrastructure of safety systems, innovation pipelines, and user experiences across every sector. Treating it as a generic human skill risks misaligning entire talent streams with the realities of work.

We need to treat communication as deliberately as we do STEM, digital literacy, or accounting. Higher education and employers can co-design new ways to teach, test, and verify communication across disciplines. Embedding industry-informed modules around the three distinct competencies — visual and non-verbal, digital and interactive, and operational communication for safety and quality — in every discipline would create a measurable, transferable baseline for graduates. Making work-integrated learning the lab where these skills are tested and credentialed could give students not just experience but portable proof of their ability to communicate in real-world contexts.

To employers, open up your playbooks: define the communication practices that drive performance and share them with education partners. To higher ed, make communication training a deliberate, experiential part of every curriculum and then show how your programs, not just applied programs, connect directly to potential career pathways and workforce outcomes.

The opportunity isn't just to fix a gap: it's to build a national asset. Canada wants to lead in innovation, safety, and economic competitiveness. To get there we need to make communication a designed, measured, and portable capability. It's more than a soft add-on to a job ad. It's one of the hardest to develop and most valuable skills for the future of work.

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