BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

STRENGTHENING CANADA'S TALENT INFRASTRUCTURE: WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE WIL WORK

JUNE 2025

The line between school and work is fading fast. Employers are hungry for job-ready talent. Students expect their education to lead to opportunity. And post-secondary institutions are under pressure to deliver both relevance and return.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) remains the most effective way to bridge the gap between school and work. But to deliver at scale — and equitably — Canada needs to move from siloed interventions to coordinated WIL approaches and infrastructure.

BHER has helped fund and support over 70,000 WIL opportunities nationwide since 2019 in partnership with the Government of Canada. We do WIL differently than others in the space and other federally-funded programs:

- We curate business + higher education partnerships, locally, regionally, and nationally
- We work with our partners to create capacity for WIL where it's needed most
- We offer all WIL types — often multiple types within a single partnership — tailored to what employers need
- Rather than subsidizing student wages, we invest in the infrastructure that makes WIL work at scale. By infrastructure, we mean the staffing, systems, and partnerships that make WIL reliable, repeatable, and relevant across institutions and regions.

Here's what we've learned about what it takes to make WIL work and what it will take for business + higher education and the governments that support them to build the next generation of WIL ecosystems.

Post-secondary system design is still siloed

Many post-secondary institutions are trying to scale WIL, but lack the centralized systems and long-term strategies to do so. In most institutions, WIL remains fragmented, dependent on faculty champions, short-term funding, or isolated units. This creates bottlenecks, limits impact, and makes scaling unsustainable.

Private sector engagement is inconsistent

WIL partnerships continue to lean heavily on the public and nonprofit sectors. Private employers, particularly in high-growth industries and especially small and medium-sized companies, struggle to navigate institutional systems, too many unique service providers or delivery partners, or see the value proposition in the first place. For example, small employers report not knowing who to contact and being approached by multiple providers with unclear or competing offers.

The people making WIL work are under-resourced

Post-secondary staff roles like industry coordinators or employer liaisons are essential to building trust and bridging institutional and private sector systems. But too often, these roles are temporary or underfunded. Institutions need to be able to hire and retain the people who make WIL possible, while industry needs the HR capacity to build and sustain post-secondary relationships.

Policy instability adds friction

Financial sustainability challenges and unclear policy shifts that impact post-secondary institutions undermine the predictability institutions and employers need to plan, invest, and deliver WIL at scale. In other words, short-horizon policy environments and reactive funding cycles make long-term WIL planning difficult across the board.

Lessons from the Field

Invest in people to unlock systems

The best WIL systems don't run on good intentions. They run on people. Institutions and companies that successfully scale WIL prioritize long-term investment in staff who know how to build partnerships and align academic and employer priorities.

Start scalable, stay scalable

Successful models don't always require structured placements. Innovative and course-embedded models reduce pressure on staffing, while connecting hundreds of students to real-world experiences. But scaling those models still requires dedicated coordination. And the goal is always to find the right fit for the student and the employer.

Align with growth sectors for long-term payoff

Programs that align with high-demand fields — from cleantech to health to digital — attract greater employer interest and institutional investment. They also strengthen Canada's talent pipelines where it matters most.

Build with collaborators, not just partners

Scaling WIL takes more than one-off partnerships. It requires ecosystem thinking and ecosystem builders. While partners execute individual initiatives, collaborators like regional associations, sector bodies, Indigenous organizations, and workforce intermediaries can help align efforts, broker trust, and ensure WIL responds to local priorities and labour trends. Their involvement can make WIL more coordinated, scalable, and strategic. Partners help you deliver. Collaborators help you build.

Building Stronger WIL Ecosystems

Our most successful WIL projects don't end — they embed. With strategic investment in centralized WIL infrastructure, post-secondary institutions are equipped not just to sustain WIL, but to scale it long after initial funding ends.

These models create the conditions for deeper, more durable partnerships with industry, especially small and medium-sized employers, and improve institutions' ability to respond to evolving workforce needs with speed and relevance.

To move from pilot to policy, industry can't be just a participant: it must become a co-owner of WIL systems.

The result is a stronger school-to-work pipeline for students, less friction for employers, and a WIL ecosystem that delivers long-term value without ongoing reliance on government wage subsidies. When the right infrastructure is in place, WIL becomes not only sustainable, but self-reinforcing: meeting the needs of learners, institutions, and industry alike.

BHER's experience shows this transformation is not only possible, but already underway. The next step is scaling what works.

The future of WIL in Canada isn't about what's possible. It's about building what's next — together.

AUTHORS:

Matthew McKean
Chief R&D Officer

Val Walker
Chief Executive Officer

Andrew Bieler
Director, Research
& Programs

Sara Miller
Program Manager of
Work-Integrated Learning