



thriving WORKPLACES

A Dual-Client Approach to Career Services

DISCOVERY PHASE REPORT SUMMARY

March 2024



Project led by



Funded by the Government of Canada under the Future Skills Program and overseen by Blueprint under the Reimagining Career Services initiative.

In partnership with Nova Scotia Departments of Labour, Skills and Immigration (LSI) and Economic Development (ED).

Acknowledgements

The **Thriving Workplaces** project is generously funded by the Government of Canada under the Future Skills Centre (FSC) and overseen by Blueprint under the Remained Career Services initiative. FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. They partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. FSC is founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

Blueprint was founded on the simple idea that evidence is a powerful tool for change. They work with policymakers and practitioners to create and use evidence to solve complex policy and program challenges. At the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to collaboratively generate and use evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges.



Introduction

What potential could we unlock if small businesses and workers were both supported to thrive at work?

This question is at the heart of the **Thriving Workplaces: A Dual-Client Approach to Career Services** project. Funded by the **Future Skills Centre** and overseen by **Blueprint** under the Reimagining Career Services initiative, the project is led by **MixtMode Consulting (MixtMode)** and the **Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF)**. The project operates in partnership with the **Nova Scotia Departments of Labour, Skills and Immigration (LSI)** and the **Nova Scotia Department of Economic Development (DED)**. The project is exploring innovations in career and employment services to meet the needs of small businesses and workers. Our aim is to design, test, and scale an innovative dual-client service model within the public employment service system that can address the challenges of creating a thriving workplace experience for small businesses and their workers.

This question is perhaps more critical today than it ever has been. Small businesses in Nova Scotia are struggling mightily to find and keep the workers they need to adapt to the realities of a changing economic environment, including unprecedented labour and skills shortages. At the same time, many workers, particularly those from equity-deserving groups, are facing challenges finding and keeping employment opportunities that align with their needs and expectations and help them thrive.

The **Thriving Workplaces** project began as a series of conversations between the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint, MixtMode, CCDF and senior decision-makers in the Nova Scotia government to explore the potential of a collaborative project focused on innovation in career and employment services. A working group of these and other partners has collaborated on the project Discovery Phase to:

- Develop a shared vision for the project focused on helping small businesses and workers thrive
- Explore the landscape of workforce development in Nova Scotia
- Engage stakeholders to understand needs and generate buy-in
- Conduct field research on the needs of small businesses and workers
- Build a shared commitment to testing service innovations and using the learnings to drive policy and systems change
- Identify opportunity areas for innovation in the employment services system that shift the focus from “getting a job” to “thriving at work”
- Share our early insights and approach with stakeholders outside Nova Scotia

This Discovery Phase has generated a wealth of learnings, insights and opportunities to test innovations in career and employment services delivery that introduce new approaches into the system and address the core dilemmas faced by small businesses and their workers.

What we have learned

Employers are struggling and many don't see a way out. Small businesses' recruitment and retention challenges are exacerbated by a lack of resources and capacity to onboard and develop employees, difficulties finding the time to invest in long-term workforce planning, and the inability to assess and buffer themselves from the impact of systemic economic and labour market shifts.

There are a range of factors that affect the workplace experience. The “workplace bargain” between employers and their workers involves negotiating a holistic suite of parallel factors. We term these factors, identified through our field research with small businesses and workers, the *Magnetic Factors* (see **Figure 1**). These factors can both attract employers and workers to each other or push them apart. Creating thriving workplace experiences for employers and workers requires them being aware of, understanding, and addressing these complex and multi-layered factors.

Figure 1: Magnetic Factors of the Workplace Bargain

<p>Meaning & Values There's an underlying meaning to our work and it helps us express our values – both helps motivate employees and employers</p>	<p>Workplace Culture This is how we show up to work and treat each other. It's the answer to a simple yet complex question: 'what's it like to work here?'</p>
<p>Inclusion & Belonging This is how diverse employees and employers experience and are supported in the workplace as people.</p>	<p>Working Arrangements This encompasses the tangible 'when', 'where' and 'how' of the work. It also includes the level of flexibility across these facets.</p>
<p>Skills & Competencies These are the abilities that workers bring to the table (have) and that the employer is looking for (needs).</p>	<p>Growth This is the need and desire for either party to grow the employees' existing skills to take on more work, different work or more responsibility.</p>
<p>Pay & Benefits These are the tangible and often monetary relationships between employees and employers. They are a balance of what both parties can afford, and change over time.</p>	<p>External conditions These are factors that are outside the control of both parties but influence their relationship and can sometimes be mitigated against.</p>

The workplace bargain is more critical and challenging for equity-deserving groups. The past experiences, opportunities and barriers experienced by Black and African Nova Scotians, Indigenous people, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, newcomers, people with disabilities and other equity-deserving groups influence their experience of the workplace bargain. Developing a thriving workplace experience for these groups requires employers to be able to explicitly acknowledge and address systemic barriers and discrimination.

Services for employers and services for individuals are currently largely disconnected from each other. Employment service providers have experience matching jobseekers with available jobs based on employers' talent and skill needs, but less experience working in a cohesive way with employers and workers concurrently to help them negotiate all the elements of the workplace bargain and cultivate thriving workplace experiences. There is also an opportunity to build stronger connections between employment services and other business/economic development services that help small businesses with related workforce challenges.

What got us here won't get us there. Simply adding more resources, services, or information to this 'fire' will not put it out. Small businesses and workers are already overwhelmed, and many are not using services that are already available because they lack the time and capacity to find and access them. To move the needle on this challenge service innovations will need to be accessible, tailored, practical, and timely.

The return on investment from focusing employment services and support on thriving workplace experiences could be enormous. Addressing the challenges facing small businesses and workers could have a transformative impact on Nova Scotia's communities and economy. Creating healthier, safer, and more welcoming workplace experiences for workers could have a transformative impact on health, productivity, satisfaction, and well-being. Businesses under 100 employees employ 57.5% of Nova Scotia's private sector workforce but make up only about 27% of Nova Scotia's GDP; the economic return on investment from addressing workforce churn and helping small businesses and their workers thrive would be substantial.¹

What we have achieved

- **Shared vision and goals** - The core focus of employment services is to help people find work and businesses find people. Through the Discovery Phase we have worked with project partners and stakeholders to start shifting the goalpost from finding work, to thriving at work, ensuring we help achieve employment stability and opportunities for individuals and much-needed employee retention for employers.

¹ Government of Nova Scotia, Economic Development (2021) [Small Business Week Highlights Entrepreneurs' Innovation and Perseverance](#); Government of Nova Scotia, Finance and Treasury Board (2022) [Business and Employment Dynamics, Nova Scotia 2019](#)

- **Understanding of user needs** - Our field research with employers and workers has given us a deep and nuanced understanding of the experiences, perspectives and challenges of small businesses and workers across the province and reinforced the need for service innovations to better meet the needs of these users.
- **Dual-client model** - We have developed a theory of a convergent service model articulating the parallelism between work seeker and small business needs, mapping the range of integrated services that might address both supply and demand-side needs through recruitment, onboarding and retention.
- **Roadmap for innovation** - Based on this model and what we learned from the Discovery Phase, we have identified a roadmap of interconnected service innovation opportunities that can help employment service providers build a dual-client service model that works in an integrated way with small businesses and workers to help them thrive.
- **Commitment to sustaining and scaling innovation** - Through our close collaboration with the Nova Scotia government, we have built a commitment to not only testing service innovations, but doing so in a way that lays the groundwork for potentially adapting and scaling them to ensure impact across the system.
- **Stakeholder buy-in** - Our engagement with system stakeholders has generated interest and excitement in this project and a commitment to participating in future stages to ensure its success.

About our approach

The **Thriving Workplaces** project is a unique partnership that brings together the resources, structures and expertise of innovation-minded public sector leaders with perspectives from service designers and experts with deep experience in career service delivery. This approach provides an opportunity to design and implement service innovations that can both operate within and stretch the potential of the existing career and employment services system. Some of the key features of our approach include:

Understanding employer, labour market and service contexts – Early on the project team recognized that deeply understanding the Nova Scotia context – the labour market landscape, needs and challenges of businesses, and the strengths and opportunities of the existing service system – would be critical for designing impactful and useful service innovations. All of our work is rooted in a strong recognition of how service innovation interacts with this existing ecosystem.

Trust and relationship building – Working to innovate within an existing system requires “going slow to go fast.” The project team has invested time in deeply understanding local needs, building trusting relationships with project partners and system stakeholders, assessing the mechanisms needed to embed innovations in existing systems, and creating a network of champions that will set the project up for success in the future.

User-centered service design – The project team and our partners from the government of Nova Scotia bring a strong, shared commitment to a service design approach that centers the needs of users and focuses on building services that incorporate their voice, ideas and perspectives. The Nova Scotia government has committed to executing service design in this way since the employment services transformation in 2016.

Systems thinking - Generating innovations with sustainable impact requires a deep understanding of the context in which those innovations operate. This project is using a systems lens to understand the connections, gaps, pain points and opportunities in the employment services and economic development ecosystem in Nova Scotia. This approach will ensure that service innovations work in a complementary way with what currently exists and reduces the likelihood that the innovations will generate unintended ripple effects.

Focused on career development – We are moving beyond the current emphasis in employment services on getting people ‘any’ jobs, to a career development approach that seeks to support sustainable workplace bargains in which both workers and employers can thrive.

Building for scale – This project is focused on developing and testing career and employment services innovations within the employment service system in Nova Scotia – amongst and with a sample of service providers – that can be effectively scaled to meet the level of user need. To ensure that innovations are scalable, the project team is working to address questions about inputs, activities, delivery channels, target users, human resource requirements, cost and complexity of service innovations from the beginning – ensuring that whatever is developed is operationally viable if or when scaled at a systems level.

Engaging system stakeholders – Effectively implementing a service innovation requires buy-in and commitment from those delivering it. The project team has placed a strong emphasis on engaging service providers to understand their needs and perspectives, ensure that innovations reflect their day-to-day reality, and laying the groundwork to ensure that intangible success factors like know-how, influence and culture are rallied behind the innovation.

Pan-Canadian relevance - The project team is committed to ensuring that this project has impact not just within Nova Scotia but across Canada. We see this project as an opportunity to develop a “playbook” for what it takes to implement a high-quality, dual-client service model that helps small businesses and workers thrive. We have already begun sharing early insights with other stakeholders through a presentation at Canada’s largest career development conference, [Cannexus](#), and an October 2023 policy forum with leaders in employment services from provincial/territorial governments.

What's next

From the data and insights generated through the **Discovery Phase**, we identified a set of interconnected opportunities for innovation that build towards a career development service model that works in an integrated way with small businesses and workers to help them thrive (see **Figure 2**). This service model will leverage the existing career development expertise and experience in the Nova Scotia Works employment services system and focus it on the workplace bargain – the complex set of factors that influence the relationship between an employer and their workers. Providing this hands-on support will help small businesses retain valued talent and workers grow in their careers.

The innovation opportunities described in **Figure 2** tackle different parts of the complex components of employment service delivery with the understanding that developing a new service model focused on the workplace bargain between small businesses and workers will perhaps require not only new or enhanced service interventions but also attention to capacity-building, service infrastructure and partnerships.

Figure 2: Our roadmap of innovation opportunities

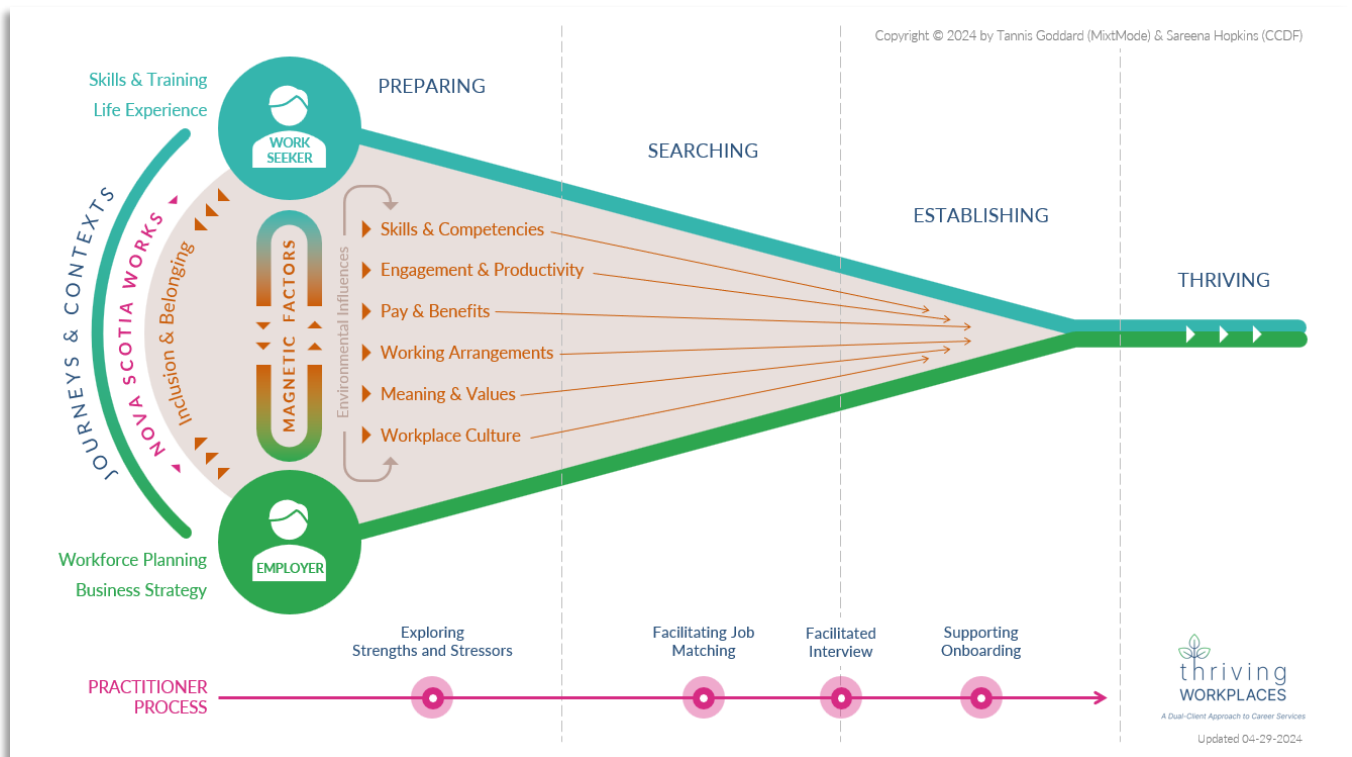


In the next phase of this project, we are excited to start putting these ideas into action. We have partnered with Nova Scotia Works employment service providers to co-design and test innovative service interventions focused on building clarity, awareness, and alignment for workers and employers around the *Magnetic Factors*.

By working to quickly develop innovations and gather real-world evidence about their relevance, effectiveness and impact in the field, we will begin generating and sharing critical and timely insights about what is needed to help small businesses and workers thrive, with a focus on strengthening the “workplace bargain” in the recruitment and onboarding phases that are so crucial to worker retention and thriving in the workplace.

Figure 3 presents the working version of the service intervention model we are testing in partnership with Nova Scotia Works service providers.

Figure 3: Thriving Workplaces dual-client service model



Beyond this phase, our hope is that the innovations we develop are scaled and implemented across the Nova Scotia service system and beyond. By empowering our career and employment services systems to help small businesses and workers thrive, we have the opportunity to improve outcomes for individuals, strengthen our economy, and positively impact communities.