

# Improving access to career supports is essential to Canadian sector's maturity

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***A new benchmarking tool aims to explore what makes a strong career development sector***

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Canada's career development sector enjoys an enviable international reputation. While attending the 2019 International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP) Symposium in Norway, Lisa and Sareena were struck by how frequently other countries referred to a Canadian event, resource or expert. As is often the case, outside perspectives provided a moment of reflection. Are we as strong as we're perceived to be? How does Canada compare to other jurisdictions? How should we define what "strong" or "good" looks like for the career development sector?

COVID-19 then upended labour and employment across Canada in 2020. A strong career development sector became more important and more urgent than ever, as Canadians faced unprecedented struggles in the world of work – with both immediate and long-lasting impacts.

The Career Development Maturity Matrix is a benchmarking tool designed to map and spark strategic conversation about the foundational elements that the career development sector requires for its structural integrity and advancement in the years to come. Created by the Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) and Challenge Factory, the Matrix identifies and measures the maturity of four sector benchmarks: quality, capacity, cohesion and access. We asked experts in Canada’s sector to rank 1) how important each Matrix benchmark is to the sector, and 2) how Canada measures up against each benchmark. The key benchmark that we’ll be discussing in this article is access.

**The Sector Benchmark: ACCESS**

**Citizen Rights** – Entitlement to quality career services across the lifespan for all Canadians is protected in legislation.

**Targeted Services** – Under-represented and marginalized groups have access to tailored and enhanced services.

**Visibility** – The public knows where and how to access quality career services locally.

**Technology** – Access to quality service is enhanced by technology-enabled delivery.

**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** – The career development sector and its services operate based on comprehensive and current DEI policy and practices.

The findings for the Matrix’s access benchmark are striking. Overall, our survey respondents viewed access as the benchmark most in need of improvement in the Canadian sector and the most difficult to achieve. These findings have immense impact on not only the sector itself, but also the clients they serve.

**Let’s unpack some important elements of the access challenge:**

**Failing first:** Access to career development in Canada may best be described as a “fail first” support system. This means Canadians are generally expected to navigate their career development by themselves, and only seek out supports when something has “gone wrong,” including unemployment and systemic barriers and discrimination.

**Technological disparities:** The technology dimension of access is affected by infrastructure (internet and cyber devices) and literacy (how to use technology to access career development supports). Both infrastructure and literacy vary across Canada by geographical region (including urban versus rural communities), socioeconomic status, provincial/territorial funding and more.

**Reflecting and serving all Canadians:** Canada has a fair number of services targeted to under-represented and marginalized groups, but there is unequal access to these resources (e.g. in the North). Leaders in the sector who develop new research, resources, tools and approaches are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), but don't yet fully reflect the diversity of the clients served. Even when tailored and enhanced services are available, outreach to target groups is not always successful and the degree to which DEI policy and practices are integrated into client interventions is inconsistent.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The challenges facing access to career development in Canada have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with career development professionals working hard to establish new partnerships and services even as reductions to funding, staffing and operations mount. The interruptions to targeted services caused by COVID-19, as well as the increased attention to mental health and well-being (by the general population and the sector), have also served to highlight Canada's pre-existing "fail first" approach to career development.

The transition to remote work models has emphasized both the gaps in technology-enabled delivery and the opportunities that technology may offer if innovative solutions are pursued robustly. For these efforts to occur at a sector-wide level, leadership and broad sector cohesion are needed to push for real change and support from funders, policymakers and other stakeholders.

The issue of access is tied not only to systemic barriers that disproportionately affect certain groups, but also to the lack of awareness and visibility of career development to the general public as a whole. Access to career development services and other supports should be a right and responsibility of every Canadian. While individuals are ultimately responsible for their own careers, no Canadian should feel alone on their career journey or unable to access career-related resources. For this to become a reality, career development needs to be normalized as a best and standard practice across every individual's career and lifespan.

Accessing career supports is not an indicator of failure. Nor is it an indicator that "something has gone wrong." It is an indicator of agency, a growth mindset and an active pursuit of career aspirations and success.

### **The role of policy in the access challenge**

The career development sector cannot advance without the fulsome backing of diverse stakeholders and policymakers. Our benchmarking tool surfaced an important observation that the accessibility and quality of career supports across the country varies depending on the amount of funding and prioritization each province/territory gives to career development. As we set about defining what a strong career development sector might look like, the importance of understanding the policy considerations involved cannot be overlooked.

The considerations involved in the challenge of access can be approached from two directions. The first is the absence in Canada of an overall awareness of and proactive approach to careers planning and exploration across the entire lifespan. Canada lags behind other countries in building a national culture that A) upholds career development as a priority for the public good, and B) sees every Canadian committed to blending and managing their paid and unpaid activities while drawing on career supports.

The second is the targeted improvement of access to career development in underserved and marginalized communities. Despite the increasingly critical roles that internet connectivity and technological literacy play in work and education, many Canadians – particularly those in rural and remote areas – don't have adequate internet access. Canadians also pay among the highest prices for mobile data in the world. This severely hampers career development professionals' abilities to deliver quality services to all Canadians, and divides those services along socioeconomic, geographic and community lines.

Canadians deserve access to quality career services throughout their educational and working lives and regardless of where they live. We look forward to advancing the Career Development Maturity Matrix as a tool to uncover key actions that address barriers to access for both those served by the sector and those who can lead this sector into the future.

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