

Cannexus23 recap: How I discovered the hidden sector of career development

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By Emily Schmidt

In January, I attended my first Cannexus, a national career development conference hosted by CERIC.

As a researcher new to the sector, I was excited to connect with and learn from other conference goers, and the diversity of session topics and speakers was striking. Dr. James Makokis, for example, delivered a powerful keynote about unconscious bias, his lived experience as an Indigenous doctor, and the importance of equality across gender, sexuality, and race. His presentation engaged me and the entire audience from start to finish, spanning so many poignant issues in Canada today.

Dr. Makokis' keynote also surprised me. It was a story of his life and career, his struggles and successes, and the conference attendees hung on his every word. But "career development" wasn't mentioned once.

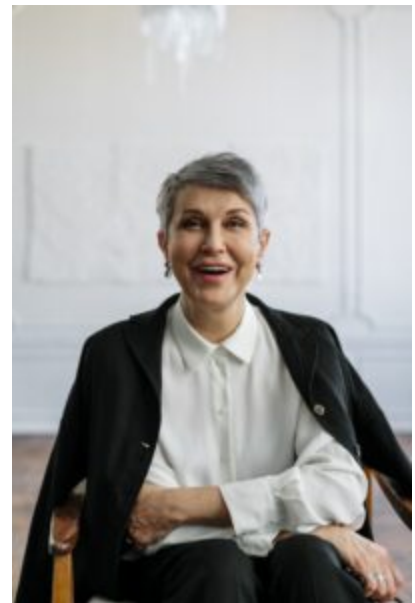
That's when I realized career development is so much more than job placements.

Throughout the three-day conference, I listened to stories about immigration to Canada and social integration, mental health journeys, gender equality struggles, and so much more. Over and over again, I saw how my original understanding of career development didn't fit in anywhere at Cannexus. Everyone I met was committed to advancing the professionalism of their craft and shaping the future of their sector, especially growing its inclusiveness and capacity for career development (r)evolution.

The revolution is here

Alongside Challenge Factory president Lisa Taylor and Learning and Communications manager Ali Breen, I helped run a session on the topic of revolutionary change.

As a B Corporation, Challenge Factory often uses the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework to measure the impact of our work. We brought this expertise to Cannexus, discussing how the career development sector is changing through the lens of SDGs—especially the goals of decent work, quality education, gender equality, and sustainable communities. We led our session participants through an interactive exercise about noticing how the sector is changing and how they themselves are experiencing that change.



Throughout the session, participants demonstrated a keen knowledge about how the career development sector is evolving, in ways they variously welcome or worry about. Their worries reflect just how connected career development professionals are to broader socioeconomic issues, including:

- increased living costs and inflation
- the limitations of current education systems
- the lack of preparation that students receive for future work requirements
- living wages vs. minimum wages
- knowledge gaps about labour market and future jobseeker needs, such as the increase in the green job sector

Ultimately, my original definition and understanding of career development was way too narrow.

The career development sector can't be separated—or isolated—from the broader ecosystem of social and economic issues that affect how people of all ages live and work in their communities. This means the range of topics that career development professionals have to engage with on a day-to-day basis, and the trends and changes they have to keep up with, go far beyond jobs and employment. It's no surprise, then, that career development professionals constantly feel like they don't have the tools or knowledge they need to provide the best possible career support to their clients. There's always something more to learn, and resources are always tight.

In *Workforce Architecture*, we write about how career development professionals are an ambitious lot. This ambition was on full display at this year's Cannexus too. Our session participants highlighted a number of complex, system-wide topics they hope will become better integrated into career development in the coming years:

- increasing diversity and inclusion
- a focus on mental health
- community building
- inclusive childcare and family support
- easier transition processes for newcomers
- better cross-sector integration
- all work being valued as decent work

Career development professionals' worries and hopes alike show just how deeply the sector is based in values of inclusion, community, and human-centred approaches to work. Although Canada at large has a fail-first system when it comes to accessing career services, the professionals who work in the field are more than ready to take a leadership role in creating a sustainable Future of Work where no one is left behind.

So much more than talking about jobs

Once the true breadth and depth of the career development sector came into focus for me, suddenly I could see this same message spreading outside Cannexus as well. On LinkedIn, for example, more than 150 career development professionals around the world contributed to a 'flash mob' campaign about how career development is #SoMuchMoreThanTalkingAboutJobs. Within 48 hours, the hashtag had reached 800,000 people.



This, I thought, is what it looks like when a hidden sector begins to step into the spotlight.

Some exciting initiatives are underway to shine that spotlight even brighter. The Canadian Career Development Foundation (CCDF) is launching the Career Development Professional Centre, a virtual hub that builds excellence and innovation in career and workforce development across Canada.

At Challenge Factory, we've partnered with CERIC and CCDF to scope and map who is doing career development work across Canada—because without a comprehensive evidence base of *what* the sector is, policymakers, funders, and Canadians will never be able to understand *why* it's so vital.

The people who work in the career development sector are as diverse as the clients they serve, and they apply their talents and expertise in so many different ways. Their impact goes beyond jobs and employment to a holistic understanding of “career” that spans the entire lifetime and its many stages and transitions, both personal and professional.

It's time career development professionals have everything they need to do what they do best. And it's time for every Canadian to discover the career development sector hiding in their schools, workplaces, and communities.