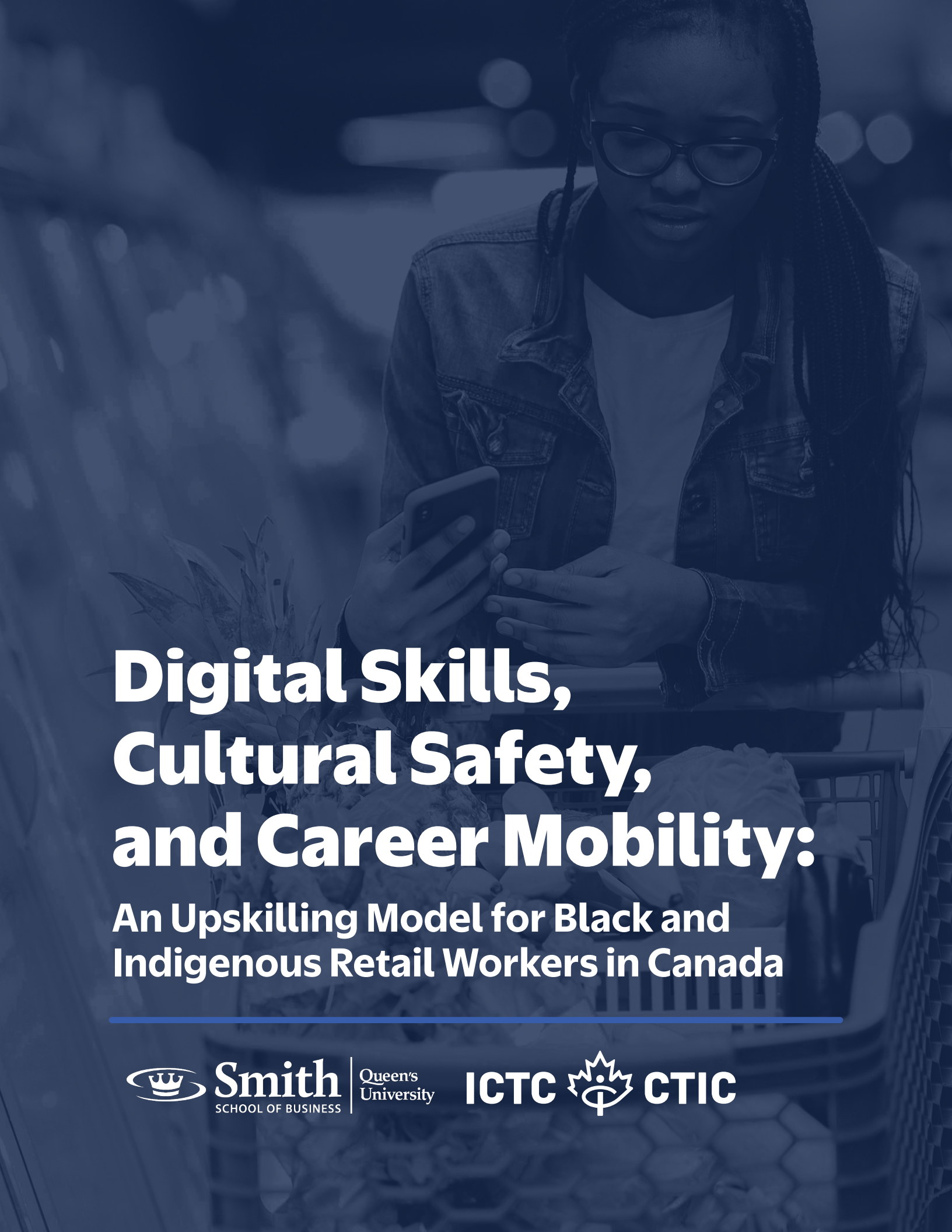




# **Digital Skills, Cultural Safety, and Career Mobility:**

**An Upskilling Model for Black and  
Indigenous Retail Workers in Canada**

---



**Smith**  
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Queen's  
University

ICTC



CTIC

# Preface



**Smith School of Business** is renowned for excellence, innovation, and leadership in business research, focusing on educating future leaders and discovering transformative new knowledge that benefits society. Faculty at Smith conduct cutting-edge research across nine area groups, publish in top-tier journals, and collaborate with international scholars. This research emphasis is integrated into the classroom, helping prepare graduates for careers across sectors. Smith educates students at the undergraduate and graduate levels and offers professional programs, all grounded in an outstanding learning experience.



**The Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC)** is a neutral, not-for-profit, national centre of expertise with the mission of strengthening Canada's digital advantage in the global economy. For more than 30 years, ICTC has delivered forward-looking research, practical policy advice, and capacity-building solutions for individuals and businesses. The organization's goal is to ensure that technology is utilized to drive economic growth and innovation and that Canada's workforce remains competitive on a global scale.

## To cite this report:

Fosu, F., O. Ivus, E. Murray, and J. F. Chavez R. January 2026. Digital Skills, Cultural Safety and Career Mobility: An Upskilling Model for Black and Indigenous Retail Workers in Canada. Ottawa: Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC).

This report was produced by the Smith School of Business at Queen's University in collaboration with the Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC).

# Executive Summary

**This report proposes a strategic upskilling model for modern organizations, with a focus on advancing Black and Indigenous workers in Canada’s retail sector and strengthening their digital skills. It presents compelling arguments on potential benefits of Black and Indigenous representation in the retail sector, synthesizes evidence on barriers to mobility, reviews leading upskilling approaches and case studies, and distills design principles for building equitable, scalable programs that serve business and community objectives.**

Black and Indigenous workers are concentrated in low-wage, precarious retail roles with limited progression and high exposure to automation, despite increasing demand for digital talent. These outcomes reflect systemic forces rather than individual deficits, such as, persistent wage gaps, discrimination in hiring and promotion, sectoral segregation, unstable hours, digital infrastructure deficits in many Indigenous communities, disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities, credential-recognition barriers, and institutional mistrust. These systemic forces create a “skills-displacement trap”: those most at risk of job loss have the fewest opportunities to access effective, culturally safe upskilling.

Indigenous management scholarship further highlights that conventional, individualistic notions of success often conflict with Indigenous values, which emphasize community well-being, relational obligations, and cultural continuity alongside income and career advancement. Many Indigenous workers navigate “cultural double shifts” in organizations that feel unsafe or alienating. This report therefore positions cultural safety, Indigenous governance, and alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Calls to Action as necessary conditions for meaningful participation, retention, and impact. Upskilling that does not address power, history, and identity risks reinforcing the inequities it seeks to solve.

This report identifies five interrelated families of effective upskilling models: competency-based, experiential and collaborative learning, lifelong learning, digital transformation

strategy, and data-driven workforce planning. High-performing initiatives across Canada and internationally (e.g., NPower Canada, World Innovation League, Merit America, Sweden’s Job Security Councils, Singapore’s SkillsFuture / Workforce Skills Qualifications [WSQ], and France’s *compte personnel de formation* [CPF]) share core features: deep employer co-design and labour-market alignment; modular, stackable, industry-recognized credentials; intensive work integrated learning; strong mentorship and peer support; and comprehensive wraparound services for equity-deserving groups. These programs achieve high completion and job placement rates and substantial post-training wage gains when they combine technical skills with coaching, career navigation and employer commitments to hiring and promotion.

Building on this evidence, this report proposes a retail-focused upskilling model for Black and Indigenous workers organized around clearly mapped career ladders and digital skill pathways. Entry-level, supervisory, specialist, store leadership, and corporate roles are linked to explicit competencies (e.g., customer service, e-commerce systems, inventory and order management, data literacy, cybersecurity awareness, leadership, and cross-functional collaboration). Training is competency-based, modular and largely integrated into work through blended delivery (on-the-job practice, micro-learning, online modules, and in-person coaching), allowing employees to progress while maintaining income and managing care responsibilities.

## Recommended design principles are:

**Centre cultural safety and co-governance:** Co-design and co-govern programs with Black- and Indigenous-led organizations; embed Indigenous worldviews, local context, and TRC-aligned content in curricula and governance.

**Make career ladders visible and credible:** Provide transparent retail career maps and a digital platform that links specific training to promotion criteria, salary progression, and mobility into specialist and corporate roles.

**Use flexible, blended, modular learning with robust supports:** Deliver short, stackable modules; recognize prior learning; integrate mentorship, peer cohorts, childcare sensitive scheduling, and digital access supports.

**Leverage data-driven workforce planning for equity:** Use skills inventories and labour market analytics to target training, personalize learning plans, and monitor participation, completion, advancement, and wage outcomes by identity group.

If implemented at scale, this model is expected to improve representation of Black and Indigenous workers along the retail career ladder, increase earnings and job security, strengthen retention and engagement, and enhance organizations' digital readiness and innovation capacity. This report concludes that upskilling, when designed through an equity and cultural safety lens, can function not only as a productivity tool but also as a lever for systemic change in Canada's retail labour market.

# Table of Contents

|                                                                                                              |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Preface .....                                                                                                | 2  |
| Executive Summary .....                                                                                      | 3  |
| Introduction .....                                                                                           | 6  |
| Diversity, Labour Markets, and the Business Case for Upskilling<br>Black and Indigenous Retail Workers ..... | 7  |
| Barriers to Economic Mobility for Black and Indigenous Retail Workers in Canada .....                        | 11 |
| → Racialized Wage Gaps and Sectoral Stratification.....                                                      | 11 |
| → Persistent Discrimination and Structural Exclusion .....                                                   | 11 |
| → Unemployment, Precarious Work, and Automation Risk.....                                                    | 12 |
| → Additional Barriers to Participating in Training.....                                                      | 13 |
| Cultural Frameworks and Indigenous Perspectives on Success.....                                              | 14 |
| → Indigenous Ways of Being, Organizing, and Relating .....                                                   | 14 |
| → Cultural Safety and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action .....                        | 14 |
| Upskilling Models and Best Practices.....                                                                    | 15 |
| → Competency-Based Models.....                                                                               | 16 |
| → Experiential and Collaborative Learning Models .....                                                       | 18 |
| → Lifelong Learning Models.....                                                                              | 21 |
| → Digital Transformation Strategy Models .....                                                               | 23 |
| → Data-Driven Workforce Planning Models .....                                                                | 24 |
| Moving Forward: Design Implications for Upskilling Programs .....                                            | 26 |
| Retail Career Ladders and Digital Skills .....                                                               | 27 |
| → Career Ladders in Retail .....                                                                             | 27 |
| → Digital Skills in Retail.....                                                                              | 29 |
| Proposed Retail Upskilling Model for Black and Indigenous Workers .....                                      | 32 |
| → Career Pathway Mapping and Visibility.....                                                                 | 32 |
| → Personalizing Employee Development Programs .....                                                          | 32 |
| → Integrating Upskilling with Career Advancement.....                                                        | 32 |
| → Delivery Methods: On-the-Job and Modular Learning .....                                                    | 33 |
| → Culturally Responsive Mentorship and Peer Support.....                                                     | 33 |
| → Flexible, Blended Delivery.....                                                                            | 33 |
| → Transferable Skills Emphasis .....                                                                         | 34 |
| → Employer and Community Partnerships .....                                                                  | 34 |
| Conclusion .....                                                                                             | 35 |
| References.....                                                                                              | 37 |

# Introduction

**Upskilling has become a central strategy for organizations seeking to remain competitive amid rapid technological change and evolving workforce demands. Defined as helping employees acquire new and relevant skills, upskilling enhances performance in current roles and prepares workers for future responsibilities (OECD 2023; World Economic Forum 2023).**

Unlike reskilling, which prepares employees for entirely new roles, upskilling builds on existing knowledge to expand competencies within an employee's current or evolving position. It is typically an organization-wide initiative designed to boost performance, efficiency, and adaptability (Aspen Institute 2021; PwC 2023). Organizations that prioritize internal mobility and strategic career development are up to seven times more successful in driving transformation and growth and are 17 times more likely to lead their markets in innovation (Upskill America 2025). When effectively executed, upskilling increases workforce flexibility, enhances employee performance across diverse roles and informs staff of current market developments (OECD 2023).

However, designing a robust upskilling model is challenging. Success depends not only on securing employers' willingness to invest resources in program implementation but also on motivating employees to commit to learning (Aspen Institute 2021; Hasan, Brougham, and Hossain 2024). Even in organizations that are financially committed to providing upskilling opportunities, employee resistance to change or willingness to participate in these opportunities may be a barrier. On the one hand, employees may perceive that the potential benefits, such

as increased earnings and job security, do not outweigh the time and effort required to participate in training. On the other hand, employees may be reluctant to participate if the programs are perceived as being poorly designed, inefficient, or ineffective or fail to consider individual and cultural preferences. Therefore, successful upskilling initiatives must be thoughtfully designed to address diverse needs and barriers, ensuring both organizational and employee buy-in (Aspen Institute 2021; World Economic Forum 2023).

This report presents a strategic upskilling model designed for modern organizations, emphasizing the advancement of Black and Indigenous workers in Canada's retail sector and digital skills development, which are two priorities becoming increasingly vital as workforce demographics shift and workplace demands evolve. This report examines persistent barriers to occupational mobility for these groups, synthesizes current research and exemplary program models, and distills leading practices in upskilling. It concludes with clear, actionable design principles and recommendations to promote equitable, effective, and scalable upskilling solutions that drive individual advancement and organizational transformation.

# Diversity, Labour Markets, and the Business Case for Upskilling Black and Indigenous Retail Workers

**Building a visible pipeline of Black and Indigenous talent and investing in skill development is essential, and Canada's demographic shifts make the case even stronger. Between 2016 and 2021, the Indigenous population grew by nearly 9%, outpacing the non-Indigenous population, with especially strong growth in Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario (Statistics Canada 2022).**

The Black population shows a similar upward trend: In 2021, Black Canadians accounted for 4.3% of the population, up from 3.5% in 2016, making them the third-largest racialized group after South Asian and Chinese populations (Domey and Patsiurko 2024). Together, Black and Indigenous communities represent about 9.5% of Canada's total population, indicating the country's increasing diversity. Considering these demographic shifts, elevating Black and Indigenous talent can deliver direct business advantages.

This is especially true as social values and demographic diversity have become decisive forces in consumer behaviour—two-thirds of Americans report that their shopping choices are shaped by their values (McKinsey & Company 2022)—and rising diversity is expected to further magnify variation in buyer preferences. This change raises the bar for representation across the retail experience. Shoppers expect to see themselves reflected in the brands they support, whether in products, marketing, frontline staff, or leadership. Simultaneously, niche and community-focused retailers, amplified by online marketplaces that provide easy access to global and local goods, are winning loyal followings. Consequently, large retailers that fail to demonstrate authentic representation risk ceding market share to brands that connect directly with their customers' identities and values.

Competitive dynamics already reflect this shift. Amazon's Black Business Accelerator and Shopify's partnerships with Black focused organizations support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) founded by Black entrepreneurs, intensifying competition for Black and Indigenous consumers on these platforms (Amazon 2021). Firms that do not reflect or engage these communities face a growing competitive threat. Retailers are also making visible commitments due to the changing market composition. In June 2021, Ulta took the Fifteen Percent Pledge, committing 15% of shelf space to Black-owned brands and allocating \$25 million to diversity and inclusion efforts. In 2021, Target (U.S.) committed \$2 billion in spend with Black-owned businesses by 2025 and to onboarding 500+ Black-owned suppliers across assortment, logistics, and facilities. After taking the Fifteen Percent Pledge, Sephora (U.S.) has since increased its assortment of Black-owned brands (from eight to 28 by 2023) and reached 15% in hair care, signalling sustained access for Black founders and visibility for Black consumers. These emerging trends reflect business responding to changing population demographics and product composition.

Upskilling and elevating Black and Indigenous talent is practical and important to align with evolving buyer priorities. Expanding Black and Indigenous representation in leadership and customer facing roles attracts and

retains diverse customers, deepens customer belonging, and strengthens trust and loyalty. Black and Indigenous leaders in management, merchandising, sourcing, and digital can identify high potential products, strengthen supplier relationships, and ensure culturally relevant assortments. Drawing on cultural insight and community ties, these employees can expand supplier networks and enrich product diversity. Evidence from Australia indicates that organizations meeting a 3.8% Indigenous workforce threshold are more likely to sustain Indigenous-focused practices (Eva et al. 2025). This suggests that by leveraging employees' connections and perspectives, retailers can broaden assortments, ensure relevance, and drive sustainable growth.

Additionally, a diverse workforce reinforces itself by attracting and retaining diverse talent. Upskilling and elevating Black and Indigenous employees into higher-level positions is critical for strengthening retention. According to Glassdoor, 76% of job seekers and employees consider diversity important when evaluating companies and job offers. The Neiman Marcus Group, for example, implemented a data-driven “bias interruption” strategy—including diverse candidate slates and panels, inclusive language, skills-based hiring, and flexible work arrangements—and surpassed its 2025 leadership diversity goals ahead of schedule while improving retention and engagement, particularly among women and people of colour (Neiman Marcus Group 2023; Socha 2024). Investment in employee growth further amplifies these effects: 94% of employees report they will stay longer if their company invests in their learning and development (LinkedIn 2019). Evidence from Australia similarly shows that organizations with Indigenous leaders are 50 to 60% more likely to sustain an Indigenous employment rate of 3.8% or higher (Eva et al. 2025). Promoting diversity across organizational levels fosters

belonging and job satisfaction, strengthening retention through the combined incentives of cultural alignment and inclusion.

Furthermore, employee diversity can strengthen innovation and efficiency. Inclusive environments encourage employees to share distinct skills and perspectives, generating organization wide spillovers. Causal evidence shows that higher employee-perceived inclusion increases innovation output, measured by patent counts and value, using indices constructed from large scale employee reviews (Eva et al. 2025). Canadian retailers are recognizing that diversity, inclusion, and mental health are essential to successful business operations. Research shows that workers' mental health and engagement improve significantly when they feel heard, valued, and psychologically safe. Canada's Best Diversity Employers reports that businesses prioritizing diversity and inclusion experience increased resilience, improved team morale, and greater innovation. Likewise, racial diversity in upper and lower management is associated with productivity gains of approximately \$729 to \$1,590 per employee annually, with the largest benefits when both tiers are diverse (Richard, Triana, and Li 2020). Cross-country evidence links leadership diversity to performance. In a study of 1,700 firms across multiple countries, companies with above-average leadership diversity reported roughly 19 percentage points higher revenue from innovation (share of sales from new products and services) and nine percentage points higher earnings-before-interest-and-taxes (EBIT) margins, demonstrating a direct innovation to profitability channel (Boston Consulting Group 2018). Moreover, firms with “2 D diversity” (including racial/ethnic diversity) were 45% more likely to report market share growth and 70% more likely to capture a new market.

Canadian retail companies, such as Loblaw Companies Ltd., Home Depot Canada, the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO), and Safeway Canada, have demonstrated significant progress in diversity, equity, and inclusion through comprehensive programs that support underrepresented groups, with some earning recognition as Canada's Best Diversity Employers in 2024 and 2025.

**Loblaw Companies Ltd.** has achieved recognition through its Culture and Inclusion governance structure: four employee resource groups (Go Further Women, Able, Embrace Your Roots, PROUD) receiving dedicated funding and showing measurable results with 28% of executive roles and 34% of management roles held by visible minorities (Loblaw 2024). Main initiatives include the “Even Better3” workshop for over 70,000 colleagues in 2024; targeted mentorship programs (Peer Circles for women leaders, coaching for Black employees, THRIVE leadership for 2SLGBTQIA+ members); partnerships with over 1,800 community groups; gender-affirming care coverage; a \$1 million community grants program; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) integration into short-term incentive plans.

**Loblaw  
Companies  
Limited**

**Home Depot Canada** established a DEI Leadership Council with 25 district-level captains and five employee resource groups totalling over 2,600 members (Orange Women's Network, Orange Ability, Orange Pride, Orange Mosaic, Orange Circle). The company conducts biannual talent planning, incorporating diversity metrics for representation, hiring, and promotion; requires DEI performance goals for all officers with CEO approval of annual action plans; implements women-in-leadership initiatives; provides senior leader mentorship for women and BIPOC talent; offers unconscious bias and inclusive leadership training; operates a cross-functional accessibility working group; and celebrates cultural events across all locations.



The **LCBO** developed an Inclusion Leadership Council addressing equity and racism through a multiyear roadmap targeting 10 opportunity areas, four employee resource groups with about 2,100 members (PEARLS, Pride Network, AdaptLCBO, Women's Action Alliance) and 700 Good Culture Ambassadors driving grassroots engagement. Notable programs include the Spirit of Inclusion Initiative providing over \$24,000 in scholarships, mentorships, and paid co-op placements for diverse women entering the beverage alcohol industry through partnerships with George Brown College, Niagara College, Brock University, and Algonquin College; mandatory inclusive performance goals for all leaders; the We Belong Here program for persons with disabilities; Raw Courage coaching for female leaders; and a Whole Person Health strategy promoting psychological safety.

**LCBO**

In addition to racial inclusion initiatives, companies across retail and non-retail sectors have implemented programs targeting diverse talent pools, including persons with disabilities. Air Canada's Diverse Abilities Employee Resource Group (ERG) provides a platform and united voice for all persons with disabilities. Safeway Canada has developed a comprehensive diversity strategy based on three business imperatives: creating welcoming customer experiences by reflecting community demographics, stimulating innovation through diverse perspectives and accessing underutilized talent pools. The strategy has resulted in successful hiring of diverse talent, including blind and deaf individuals into management roles. The company has fostered an inclusive workplace culture through several mechanisms. All managers completed mandatory full-day diversity workshops. Five district-level diversity boards across British Columbia, comprised of managers and employees, developed annual mandates. Store recruiters implemented diversity initiatives at individual locations. Safeway achieved measurable

results across multiple demographics. Visible minorities comprised 26% of employees, 27% of assistant managers, and 11% of store managers. Women represented 58% of employees, 29% of assistant managers, and 13% of store managers. Approximately 5% of staff were people with disabilities, while 5% were Indigenous (with 8% in assistant or store manager positions). The company implemented extensive development programs, including a mentorship program where everyone is both a mentor and is mentored, a retail leadership development program with transparent 200-item management development plans, mandatory Toastmasters chapters, and a women's networking group that substantially increased women's representation in management. The Ontario Corporate Training Centre case studies showcase similar successful disability-inclusive hiring practices across multiple sectors, demonstrating how businesses address labour shortages while creating opportunities for people with disabilities.

# Barriers to Economic Mobility for Black and Indigenous Retail Workers in Canada

Black and Indigenous retail workers in Canada encounter persistent, intersecting barriers to economic mobility, deeply rooted in the country's legacy of systemic racism, colonialism, and structural exclusion. These communities are overrepresented in low-wage, precarious retail jobs, which is one of the largest employment sectors for both groups, while remaining underrepresented in high-paying, technology-driven occupations despite the growing demand for digital talent.

These disparities do not stem from individual shortcomings, but rather from a system shaped by historical injustices and persistent institutional biases. Factors such as employment discrimination, the devaluation of prior credentials, limited access to professional development, and geographic isolation contribute to the exclusion of Black and Indigenous workers from economic advancement. Addressing these challenges requires more than simply closing a “skills gap.” Effective upskilling and reskilling programs must directly confront the cultural, structural, and psychological barriers that influence the lived experiences of these workers.

## Racialized Wage Gaps and Sectoral Stratification

Wage data highlight persistent and significant disparities: Black and Indigenous workers in Canada consistently earn less than their non-racialized counterparts, even when accounting for education and experience. A 2025 report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) found that, in 2024, the median hourly wage for racialized workers aged 25 to 54 was \$29.63, compared to \$35.02 for white workers, which is a gap of 15% (Scott 2025). For Indigenous Peoples, the disparities are similarly pronounced. According to a 2022 Statistics Canada report, First Nations individuals living off reserve earned a median

hourly wage of \$28.78, representing an 11% gap relative to non-Indigenous workers, while Métis workers earned \$30.38 per hour, which is a 7% gap (Statistics Canada 2024).

These wage gaps are even more pronounced in the retail sector, where Black and Indigenous workers are disproportionately represented in cashier and frontline sales positions. These roles typically pay below the national average. As of December 2024, the Government of Canada Job Bank reported a median hourly wage for cashiers of \$15.50, with most earning between \$15.00 and \$18.50 per hour, which is substantially lower than the national average for other occupations. This concentration in lower-wage retail positions not only limits income potential but also reduces access to employer-sponsored professional development. Consequently, Black and Indigenous workers are more likely to be in a “skills trap,” where those in low-skill, high-risk jobs have the least opportunity to access upskilling and career advancement.

## Persistent Discrimination and Structural Exclusion

Substantial quantitative and qualitative research demonstrates that Black and Indigenous workers in Canada face systemic exclusion across multiple aspects of the workplace, including hiring, promotion, and

organizational culture. For example, a York University survey found that 75% of Black Canadians identified workplace racism as a significant barrier to career advancement (Foster et al. 2023). These inequities are evident in the ongoing underrepresentation of Black and Indigenous employees in leadership roles, increased scrutiny during performance evaluations, and limited access to training and advancement opportunities (Agarwal et al. 2024).

Indigenous workers often report being relegated to symbolic or liaison roles within non-Indigenous organizations, where their contributions are frequently marginalized and cultural identities undervalued. Research by Salmon, Chavez, and Murphy (2023) highlights that many Indigenous employees perceive their workplaces as culturally alienating and unsafe, especially in environments lacking Indigenous leadership or culturally responsive supports. The exclusion or devaluation of Indigenous Knowledge systems undermines retention and contributes to what scholars term a “cultural double-shift,” where Indigenous workers must constantly balance competing organizational and community expectations.

Many scholars argue that these experiences are deeply rooted in the lasting impacts of colonialism, which continue to surface as discriminatory practices against Indigenous employees and entrepreneurs (Banerjee and Tedmanson 2010; Bohonos 2021; Down 2012; Henry and Wolfgramm 2018; Huang, Fowler, and Baskerville 2016; Jenkins 1977; Macpherson et al. 2021; Truhon 2008). Systemic barriers produce tangible consequences, such as limited access to public and financial services that hinder entrepreneurial success (Gunewardena and Seck 2020). Additionally, Indigenous workers often encounter organizational cultures they perceive as exclusionary or unsafe. Research consistently shows that in these environments, Indigenous employees’ contributions are frequently undervalued and their roles narrowly defined (Bohonos 2021; Haar and Martin 2021).

## **Unemployment, Precarious Work, and Automation Risk**

In 2024, the unemployment rate for Black and Indigenous populations in Canada was 13%, which is nearly double the national average of 6.9%. This disparity reflects broader patterns of sectoral segregation within the Canadian labour market. More than 30% of Black workers and over 28% of Indigenous workers are employed in retail and other low-wage service roles, compared to 18% of non-racialized Canadians (Statistics Canada 2024).

International comparisons further highlight these inequities. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data show that across member countries, including Canada, there is a 20.2 percentage point employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous adults in rural areas, while in urban areas the gap is 8.4 percentage points. These figures underscore the persistent barriers to stable employment and upward mobility faced by Black and Indigenous workers, particularly in sectors and regions where economic opportunities are already limited.

Many retail jobs held by Black and Indigenous workers are not only low-paid but also highly precarious, characterized by part-time, temporary, and dead-end positions with minimal prospects for advancement. Nearly 29% of Black workers and 26% of Indigenous workers in the retail and service sectors are involuntarily employed part-time, compared to 18% of non-racialized workers. This disproportionate concentration in unstable employment makes Black and Indigenous workers especially vulnerable to economic shocks and significantly limits their opportunities for long-term career growth.

The structural vulnerability faced by Black and Indigenous workers is intensified by the threat of automation. As Broady et al. (2021) document, Black and Indigenous workers are disproportionately concentrated in occupations with high automation risk and

limited job security. For example, roles such as cashiers and clerks, which are positions frequently held by Black and Indigenous workers, are among the most susceptible to automation. Approximately 28% of Black workers and 27% of Indigenous workers are employed in jobs with a 70% or greater probability of being automated, compared to 21% of non-racialized workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic sharply magnified existing inequities in the labour market. In 2020, employment losses reached 19% for Black workers, 17% for Indigenous workers, and 11% for non-racialized workers. These intersecting vulnerabilities have led to a “skills-displacement trap”: those most susceptible to job loss, often in precarious, low-wage roles, are also the least likely to access upskilling and reskilling opportunities. This dynamic perpetuates cycles of economic insecurity and limits pathways to stable, well-paid employment for Black and Indigenous workers.

| Indicator (Retail/Service)             | Black Workers | Indigenous Workers | Non-Racialized Workers |
|----------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Part-time involuntary employment       | 29%           | 26%                | 18%                    |
| Jobs at high risk of automation (≥70%) | 28%           | 27%                | 21%                    |
| COVID-period employment loss (2020)    | -19%          | -17%               | -11%                   |

**Table 1: Indicators of Employment Precarity, Automation Risk, and the Pandemic Impacts by Worker Group.**

## Additional Barriers to Participating in Training

Even when upskilling programs exist, Black and Indigenous workers often face additional barriers that limit participation:

**Digital divide:** Limited access to reliable, high-speed internet remains a major barrier for many Indigenous communities, especially those located in rural and remote regions. In Saskatchewan, for instance, 1.7% of on-reserve households meet the broadband standards set by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). This lack of connectivity restricts access to online courses and digital training resources and leads to higher attrition rates in upskilling programs, as participants struggle with unreliable internet service (ISED Canada 2025).

**Childcare burden:** Racialized and Indigenous women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid care work, including childcare and eldercare. This responsibility reduces their ability to participate in training programs, especially those scheduled during evenings or weekends. Studies and policy reports highlight that without affordable, accessible, and culturally appropriate childcare, many women are forced to forgo upskilling opportunities, further entrenching gender and racial inequities in the workforce.

**Credential-recognition and “Canadian experience” bias:** For Black immigrants and Indigenous professionals with informal or nonaccredited skills, employers’ demands for Canadian experience and formal credentials restrict advancement into higher-skilled roles.

**Institutional mistrust:** Historical injustices and ongoing discrimination have fostered deep mistrust of government agencies and corporate employers among many Black and Indigenous communities. This mistrust leads to lower participation rates in government- or employer-led training initiatives unless programs are co-designed with, and visibly governed by, Indigenous- and Black-led organizations. Without culturally safe and community-driven approaches, efforts to engage these groups in upskilling and reskilling often fall short.

# Cultural Frameworks and Indigenous Perspectives on Success

## Indigenous Ways of Being, Organizing, and Relating

In a review of more than 3,000 articles, Salmon, Chavez, and Murphy (2023) identified three themes in Indigenous organizational research: (1) Indigenous ways of being, (2) Indigenous organizing, and (3) Indigenous relating. This review identifies challenges faced by Indigenous workers and entrepreneurs.

The literature shows that Indigenous entrepreneurs draw heavily on cultural identity, relational networks, and community-oriented values (Cahn 2008; Klyver and Foley 2012; Logue et al. 2018; Matias et al. 2018; Peredo and McLean 2013; Warren, Mika, and Palmer 2017; Widjojo and Gunawan 2020). They rely on dense social networks for business development and sustainability (Henry, Dana, and Murphy 2018; Tapsell and Woods 2010; Tretiakov et al. 2020). These relational dynamics are integral to how business is conceptualized and pursued. Success is not solely defined in individual or financial terms; instead, Indigenous entrepreneurs often prioritize overcoming poverty (Anderson, Dana, and Dana 2006; Peredo 2003), supporting familial and communal well-being (Imas, Wilson, and Weston 2012; Murphy et al. 2020) and contributing to the broader transformation of their communities (Ruwhiu et al. 2021).

## Cultural Safety and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action

In organizational contexts, expanding research examines the practices that enhance the

recruitment and retention of Indigenous employees. Critical enablers include formal and informal social support networks (McPhee et al. 2017; Nicholson, Hoyer, and Gallant 2011), culturally responsive training programs (Rich and Giles 2015; Wilkinson, Fogarty, and Melville 1996), and workplace conditions that foster positive work-life balance (Haar and Brougham 2020) and cultural satisfaction (Haar and Brougham 2011).

Among these, cultural safety training is particularly significant. Originally developed in the health care sector, this approach has gained increasing relevance across employment and education settings in Canada. Unlike conventional diversity or sensitivity training, cultural safety explicitly addresses power imbalances in service delivery and organizational dynamics. It acknowledges cultural difference and centres the experience of the recipient: it is the individual receiving the service or training who determines whether the interaction was respectful and culturally appropriate (Rich and Giles 2015).

These practices are closely aligned with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (TRC 2015), which advocate for education and training on the history of Indigenous Peoples, including the legacy of residential schools, treaties, Indigenous law, and Crown-Indigenous relations, as well as skill-building in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism. Embedding these principles into workplace policies and professional development initiatives is essential for fostering inclusive environments in which Indigenous employees can participate fully and thrive.

# Upskilling Models and Best Practices

## **Competency-Based Models (CBM)**

Competency-based models emphasize demonstrable mastery of clearly defined skills, knowledge, and behaviours rather than time spent in training, with learners advancing only upon meeting prespecified performance standards that align closely with workplace requirements.

Key success factors include deep employer engagement in curriculum co-design, flexible and stackable industry-recognized credentials that allow modular progression, rigorous competency assessments rather than seat-time requirements, and comprehensive wraparound supports such as mentorship, coaching, and financial assistance to help marginalized groups overcome barriers.

## **Experiential and Collaborative Learning Models**

Experiential and collaborative learning models centre on active engagement through a “do, reflect, think, and apply” methodology, grounded in social constructivism where learners work together to deepen understanding through hands-on practice, real-world problem-solving, and relational collaboration marked by trust, respect, and equality.

Success factors include intensive practical training with theoretical instruction, mentorship, peer support, and authentic workplace experiences, resulting in enhanced employability, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills. Culturally responsive approaches, such as Indigenous mentoring programs and community-based initiatives in remote Indigenous communities, demonstrate the power of cultural transmission, storytelling, and collective well-being in achieving strong employment outcomes, increased self-esteem, and mutual benefits for mentors and mentees.

## **Lifelong Learning Models**

Lifelong learning models in Industry 4.0 represent a sustained mindset of continuous, personalized education rather than isolated skill acquisition, characterized by curiosity, initiative, reflection, and adaptability that enables individuals and organizations to keep pace with rapid technological transformation and evolving workplace demands.

Rather than a standalone model, lifelong learning functions as an integrative principle that can be embedded across other workforce development approaches, such as CBMs and experiential models, through mechanisms like work-integrated learning, close industry-academia-government collaboration, and portable, stackable credentials that support career-long development.

### **Digital Transformation Strategy Models**

Digital transformation strategies involve a holistic, systematic approach that integrates technology, people, and processes to address widening digital skills gaps and drive organizational change, moving beyond simply digitizing existing operations to fundamentally shifting how organizations operate and deliver value through aligned technological adoption, cultural change, and structural realignment.

Success principles align with previous models: deep employer engagement, comprehensive support systems including mentorship and coaching, and modular credentials; people-centric organizational culture that prioritizes transparency, trust, and psychological safety; cross-functional, agile teams that can rapidly adapt to change; adult learning principles such as asynchronous, peer-supported, and self-paced progression.

### **Data-Driven Workforce Planning Models**

Data-driven workforce planning leverages advanced analytics, including employee skills inventories, performance metrics, real-time labour-market data, and AI-powered tools, to proactively identify skill gaps, forecast future workforce needs, align upskilling strategies with business objectives, and develop targeted, personalized training programs.

Success factors echo previous models: employer engagement, comprehensive supports, and equity focus, while emphasizing data-specific elements, such as continuous real-time labour-market monitoring and curriculum adjustment, AI-powered personalization of learning pathways and progress tracking, employer feedback loops integrated into program design, and skills gap analysis that informs individual training plans and organizational talent strategies. Collectively, these data-driven approaches enhance organizational agility, competitiveness, career mobility, and equitable adaptation to rapidly changing labour markets.



## **Competency-Based Models**

Competency-based models (CBMs) have become a prominent framework in workforce development, emphasizing demonstrable mastery of clearly defined skills, knowledge and behaviours, instead of just spending a set amount of time in class. In CBMs, learners advance only upon reliably meeting prespecified performance standards, ensuring a close alignment between training outcomes and workplace requirements (Le Deist and Winterton 2005). This approach has proven particularly effective in addressing skills gaps and improving employment outcomes across diverse populations and sectors (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013; Klein-Collins 2012). Employer-driven CBMs, such as “Digital: Introducing Black Canadians to Tech Skills &

Jobs” and NPower Canada/ADaPT, illustrate the impact of industry engagement and co-designed curricula in high-growth sectors like AI, fintech, cybersecurity, and health tech, integrating mentorship, hackathons, and paid placements, and embedding industry-recognized credentials from leading vendors (Agarwal et al. 2024; Cukier, Findlay, and Lee 2023). For example, the Digital program placed 340 of 500 trainees in tech roles, while NPower Canada enabled over 1,600 graduates, primarily racialized youth and newcomers, to secure digital careers with Fortune 500 firms, achieving 80 to 85% placement rates and notable post-training wage growth (Agarwal et al. 2024; NPower Canada 2023).

## Competency-Based Models Mini-Case Study: **Lululemon**



grow personally and professionally, with regional, national, and academic pathways. Their integrated model spans tech-enhanced onboarding, individual goal coaching, formal education, and well-being and community impact, woven into a corporate commitment to career pathways and a transparent, supportive culture.

Lululemon is an interesting mini-case study with respect to its approach to building an upskilling ecosystem that empowers retail staff to excel at their current role and

### Notable aspects of their upskilling ecosystem include the following:

#### A. Onboarding and Product Knowledge

- **AI tutor platform:** Developed in collaboration with UW iSchool students, this internal GPT 4-powered web tool quizzes new associates on products, fills knowledge gaps, and accelerates onboarding.
- **Fabric and product training:** Through gamified learning and friendly in-store competitions, team members master technical product details (e.g., stretch types, fabrics) in a fun, engaging way.

#### B. Goal Setting and Personal Development

- **1/5/10-year planning tools:** From day one, employees craft personal and professional long-term goals using templated frameworks and are paired with a goal-setting coach and accountability group, fostering deep connection and focus.
- **Leadership workshops and coaching:** Lululemon treats every Educator (their term for a retail worker) as a leader. They run mentorship and “Leadership Series” sessions to help staff grow into leadership roles.

#### C. Formal Leadership and Management Education

**Business diploma for managers:** In Australia/New Zealand stores, regional and training managers (with one or more years in management) can enroll in a fully funded Diploma of Business through Swinburne University.

- Covers leadership, human resources (HR), marketing, operations, finance, and strategic planning in eight units.

- Structured to be completed in 18 months (extended to 21 months to accommodate seasonality).
- Graduates can use up to eight credits toward an undergrad degree, and after three years full time, can pursue a Graduate Certificate of Business Administration, and then a Master of Business Administration (MBA).

#### D. Ongoing Learning and Culture

- **Weekly/bi-weekly store newsletters:** Managers distribute newsletters with product updates, regional store performance, shout outs, and event information, keeping everyone informed and engaged.
- **Mind, body, and community workshops:** Programs like “lululemon CARE” mental health training introduced in 2023, plus yoga training and mindfulness workshops, support holistic well-being.
- **Inclusion, diversity, equity, and action (IDEA) and Impact Agenda:** Full time staff are allotted 40 hours of paid learning and volunteer time annually (“Values Day”) to pursue personal growth or community projects.

#### E. Continuous Development and Staff Support

- **Mentorship and Leadership Series:** Targeted development programming helps employees build skills to progress.
- **Transparent culture and recognition:** Programs spotlight top performers and encourage sharing best practices across locations, cultivating a supportive environment.

In the United States, Cape Cod Community College (4Cs) Workforce Programs and Merit America further demonstrate the effectiveness of CBMs. 4Cs aligns short-term occupational certificates with regional labour-market demand in healthcare, skilled trades, and mental health, achieving 80 to 100% job placement and high certification pass rates for a largely BIPOC and immigrant learner base (Housel et al. 2023). Merit America targets working adults without four-year degrees, combining asynchronous coursework, peer cohorts, and personalized coaching to deliver industry-recognized credentials, with alumni reporting average wage gains of \$21,000 to \$24,000 annually and an 80% completion rate (Brookings Institution 2019; Merit America 2023).

CBMs also show promise in humanitarian and job-transition contexts. The Skilled Birth Attendant program on the Thai-Myanmar border aligns learning objectives with global standards and uses structured clinical exams to verify competence, resulting in a 90% completion rate and improved clinical outcomes (White et al. 2016). Sweden's Job Security Councils extend CBMs to job-transition services, using skills assessments and retraining to achieve an 88% to 90% re-employment rate for displaced workers, supported by early intervention and employer-union collaboration (Brookings Institution 2019; Swedish Job Security Councils 2023).

Internationally, Singapore's Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) system exemplifies

a mature, state-wide CBM infrastructure. Sector-specific frameworks, coauthored by employers and government agencies, define competencies for modular and stackable credentials, promoting lifelong learning and labour-market mobility without requiring formal academic prerequisites (SkillsFuture Singapore 2023; Tan 2016).

Other notable examples include Amazon Technical Academy, PwC Digital Academy and Accelerator, and Guardian Life's partnership with General Assembly, all of which use structured CBMs to advance employees based on demonstrated mastery, rather than time spent. These programs often combine modular credentials, rigorous assessment, and wraparound supports such as mentorship, coaching, financial stipends, and community-building to ensure learner success and labour-market gains (Amazon Technical Academy 2023; PwC 2023). In these programs, three ideas stand out. First, employers are closely involved to make sure the skills taught are up-to-date and valuable. Second, the programs offer flexible, stackable credentials that are recognized by the industry, making it easier for people to build their skills step by step. Third, there is strong support to help people from marginalized groups overcome barriers. The evidence suggests that well-implemented CBMs accelerate workforce inclusion, strengthen organizational talent pipelines, and deliver measurable socio-economic returns (Aspen Institute 2021; Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013; Klein-Collins 2012).



## **Experiential and Collaborative Learning Models**

Experiential and collaborative learning models have become central paradigms in workforce development, grounded in theories that emphasize active engagement, social constructivism, and community-based participation. Experiential learning is often described through a “do, reflect, think, and apply” methodology, highlighting the importance of learners' active involvement

at every stage (Butler, Church, and Spencer 2019). Collaborative learning, similarly, rooted in social constructivism, underscores the benefits of learners working together to deepen understanding. The literature differentiates between functionalist and relational models of collaboration, with relational approaches, marked by trust, respect, and equality, proving especially

effective for diverse groups. Studies consistently demonstrate that these learning strategies enhance achievement, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and self-esteem.

A variety of workforce programs practice these principles. For example, Amazon's Mechatronics and Robotics Apprenticeship and Marriott's Global Voyage Leadership Program combine intensive hands-on training with theoretical instruction, mentorship, and job placement, equipping participants for specialized roles and leadership positions (Amazon 2023; Marriott International 2025). Randstad's Global Mentorship Certification further illustrates how a blend of theory and practice, delivered in a virtual, peer-supported format, can uphold rigorous mentorship standards internationally (Randstad 2024).

Culturally responsive and community-based approaches add another dimension to experiential learning. Indigenous mentoring programs, such as the University of Newcastle's initiative, centre cultural transmission, storytelling, and collective well-being, achieving strong employment outcomes through culturally matched mentoring, peer support, and real-world exposure (Burgess and Dyer 2009). Volunteer role model outreach in remote Northern Territory communities of Australia demonstrate the reciprocal benefits of such programs: Volunteers gain cultural competence and personal growth, while youth experience increased self-esteem and inspiration (Cinelli and Peralta 2015).

Work-integrated learning demonstrates significant positive employment outcomes when academic studies are combined with quality workplace experiences. In Canada, nearly half of Ontario's postsecondary students participate in co-op or internship programs, benefiting from enhanced employability and knowledge transfer (Sattler and Peters 2013). Employer-integrated digital skills programs, such as NPower Canada's work-integrated learning and Digital: Introducing Black Canadians to Tech Skills & Jobs, further illustrate

the effectiveness of simulated workplace activities, real-world projects, and mentorship in launching digital careers, especially for underrepresented groups.

Community-based and peer-supported learning models further enhance engagement and job readiness. Programs like Merit America and Jobs for the Future (JFF) connect theory to authentic problems and foster teamwork, coaching, and clear career pathways (Brookings Institution, 2019). These approaches develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills through meaningful contact with employers and peers.

In healthcare and skilled trades, experiential programs such as the Skilled Birth Attendant Training for refugees and community college workforce initiatives achieve high completion and job placement rates through immersive practice, mentorship, and wraparound supports. Sweden's Job Security Councils institutionalize experiential learning in job transition, offering individualized coaching, retraining, and placement services, and achieving high re-employment rates through collaborative employer-union partnerships.

Meta-analytical studies confirm that experiential and collaborative learning consistently yield superior outcomes compared to traditional methods, with notable gains in empathy, well-being, achievement, and motivation. Programs are most effective when they incorporate group goals, accountability, and culturally responsive support, demonstrating that elements that ensure the effectiveness of these programs are similar to the ones for CBMs (Burch et al. 2019; Chan et al. 2021).

Upskill Canada is a national talent platform funded by the Government of Canada's Upskilling for Industry Initiative that connects fast-growing companies with qualified talent while creating new career pathways for workers. The program helps workers rapidly transition into high-demand roles across six high-growth sectors: digital technology,

cybersecurity, agricultural technology, advanced manufacturing, clean technology, and biomanufacturing. Upskill Canada places employers, particularly SMEs, at the forefront of skills development. The program works in partnership with training providers, industry association community groups, and employment agencies across Canada. These partnerships build innovative rapid upskilling programs that are demand-driven and informed by industry needs. Programs are delivered to pre-screened participants with at least three years of work or volunteer experience. They include job placement assistance while incorporating equity and diversity targets. Upskill Canada operates through a comprehensive ecosystem. This includes the Upskill Canada Hub, a one-window solution connecting workers with programs that match their skills and career goals.

The Learning Sandbox provides resources, workshops, webinars, and tools to help delivery partners build effective upskilling programs aligned with the Palette model. A national network of delivery partners receives funding to design and deliver employer-led programs. The initiative aims to help more than 15,000 Canadians, including those from underrepresented groups, connect

with new work opportunities. Ultimately, it drives lasting improvements to the upskilling ecosystem by building close collaborations across training providers, employers, and other partners to shift mindsets around talent development and utilization.



## Experiential and Collaborative Models

### Key Features

- Hands-on projects and apprenticeships
- Peer learning and mentoring
- Real-world problem solving
- Leadership development

### Implementation Steps

1. Partner with employers to offer internships and apprenticeships.
2. Incorporate group projects and peer mentoring into the curriculum.
3. Provide structured reflection and feedback opportunities.
4. Rotate roles among participants for broader experience.

**References:** Chan et al. 2021; Kolb 1984; Marriott International 2025



## Lifelong Learning Models

Lifelong learning models in Industry 4.0 marks a significant shift toward continuous, personalized education, enabling individuals and organizations to keep pace with rapid technological transformation and evolving workplace demands (Camacho-Zuñiga 2025; OECD 2020; UNESCO 2021). Scholars emphasize that this shift is best supported through close collaboration among industry, academia, and government, which collectively foster the development of relevant, future-oriented competencies and ensure resilience in an increasingly digitized economy (Bjursell and Ramsten 2020; Camacho-Zuñiga 2025; Pichette et al., 2019). Rather than viewing learning as a series of isolated skill acquisitions, the literature frames lifelong learning as a sustained mindset characterized by curiosity, initiative, reflection, and adaptability that is cultivated through integrated academic and workplace experiences (Camacho-Zuñiga

2025). Work-integrated learning emerges as an important mechanism for helping workers build the adaptive capacity needed to thrive in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments (Camacho-Zuñiga 2025).

Employer-driven, co-designed models exemplify this approach in practice. For instance, the NPower Canada and ADaPT initiative demonstrates how embedding industry partners directly into curriculum development and delivery can prioritize learning agility and sustained upskilling for long-term digital career advancement (Ted Rogers School of Management, Diversity Institute, and Future Skills Centre, 2023). This model not only departs from traditional educational pathways but also advances equity by focusing on inclusive recruitment, particularly for racialized youth and underrepresented groups.

### Lifelong Learning Mini-Case Study:

## BASF

There is little publicly available information on specific upskilling/reskilling programming for Indigenous retail workers. There are, however, insights from other sectors.

For example, in 2022, BASF Canada, along with Bullfrog Power, donated \$25,000 to fund a Community Wind Skills Training Program at Maskwacis Cultural College that was delivered by Iron & Earth in partnership with Cree communities.

The program offered five days of classroom learning and five days of hands-on installation training to nine Indigenous trainees. They installed:

- Two solar arrays (5.28 kW DC / 6 kW AC)
- One 1.1 kW wind turbine

The curriculum was co-developed with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, incorporating traditional perspectives and local ecological approaches in line with reconciliation efforts.

Outcomes and community impact were tracked leading to the following:

- **Technical achievements:** Fully functioning solar and wind systems were installed, serving the college and surrounding community.
- **Skills developed:** Trainees gained the ability to design, install, and maintain clean-energy systems, leaving Maskwacis with real-world renewable-energy infrastructure and new local expertise.
- **Community celebration:** A community celebration marked the turbine installation, highlighting the cultural and technical success of the initiative.

In contrast, France's CPF offers a universal, credit-based system that provides career-long access to training, regardless of employment status. Individuals accumulate portable training credits annually, which can be used at any stage of their career, including during periods of unemployment or transition. Funded by employer contributions and structured to promote competition among training providers, the CPF has reached over 3.9 million users and is recognized as a cornerstone for lifelong learning and career flexibility (OECD 2020; UNESCO 2025). Its foundation in individual rights to training and portable skill development enables workers to continually adapt to labour-market changes, offering broad population coverage and maintaining quality through market-driven mechanisms (OECD 2020; UNESCO 2025).

Initiatives like Singapore's SkillsFuture for Digital Workplace 2.0 illustrate the application of these principles, focusing on automation, cybersecurity, data analytics, and artificial intelligence across a range of sectors to meet the demands of digital transformation (OECD 2023; SkillsFuture Singapore 2023).

Across these diverse models and geographies, several common themes emerge. Effective

lifelong learning initiatives are characterized by deep employer engagement, ensuring that curricula remain relevant and valued in the labour market (Bjursell and Ramsten 2020; NPower Canada 2024 UNESCO 2025).



## Lifelong Learning

### Key Features

- Ongoing, self-directed learning
- Mix of formal and informal education
- Flexible learning pathways
- Tuition support and online access

### Implementation Steps

1. Offer accessible online and in-person courses.
2. Provide tuition reimbursement or financial support.
3. Encourage individualized learning plans and career coaching.
4. Recognize and reward ongoing skill development.

**References:** Camacho-Zuñiga 2025; OECD 2023; World Economic Forum 2025

### Lifelong Learning Mini-Case Study:

## Ulta Beauty - MUSE Program

One standout example of a global retailer with a dedicated upskilling program for Black employees is Ulta Beauty, through its MUSE (magnify, uplift, support, empower) initiative. The MUSE platform was launched in early 2021 to cultivate Black talent across Ulta's organization.

### Key features include:

- Quarterly unconscious bias and inclusivity training for all store and salon staff.
- A Diverse Leaders Program offering mentorship to Black employees and executive exposure.
- Broader changes in recruitment processes to intentionally promote inclusion.

### Ulta measures success by tracking:

- **Growth in Black representation:** Aim to double Black-owned brands on shelves (tied to broader DEI goals).
- **Employee advancement and retention:** While exact public metrics aren't shared, Ulta commits to quarterly review of progress through its Executive D&I Council.
- **Cultural impact:** Surveying staff post-training to assess:
  - › Sense of belonging
  - › Bias awareness
  - › Mentorship outcomes
- **Supply-chain commitment:** Investment of \$4 million in marketing Black-owned brands, demonstrating connection between employee development and supplier diversity.



## Digital Transformation Strategy Models

Digital transformation strategies in contemporary organizations are defined by a systematic approach that integrates technology, people, and processes to address the widening digital skills gap and drive organizational change (Shahzad et al. 2025). Rather than simply digitizing existing operations, true digital transformation requires a holistic shift in how organizations operate and deliver value, with research highlighting the importance of aligning technological adoption with cultural and structural change (Moore 2025; Shahzad et al. 2025). Practical examples of large-scale digital transformation include Microsoft and LinkedIn's Skills for Jobs program, which provides free access to hundreds of courses and certificates for in-demand roles (Microsoft 2022), and Schneider Electric's Open Talent Market, which leverages AI to match employees with roles, projects, and mentoring opportunities, democratizing career development and reducing hiring biases (Raconteur 2024). Seagate's internal talent marketplace further demonstrates the tangible benefits of digital strategies, including significant cost savings and increased diversity in project participation (Gloat 2023).

These cases illustrate that successful transformation involves technology but also requires fostering a people-centric culture. Cultural change is essential, with research showing that organizations that prioritize transparency, trust, continuous learning, data literacy, and agile, cross-functional teams achieve higher rates of transformation success (Mercer 2025).

Employer-driven programs, such as Digital: Introducing Black Canadians to Tech Skills & Jobs, exemplify how co-designed curricula, mentorship, and real-world projects can upskill participants for high-growth tech sectors, resulting in measurable employment outcomes and enhanced job competitiveness (Digital Supercluster 2025). Similarly, Merit

America's flexible, hands-on training model supports adult learners balancing work and study, leading to strong job placement rates and significant wage gains (Brookings Institution 2019). These programs reflect adult learning principles by offering asynchronous, peer-supported, and competency-based progression tailored to diverse learner needs.

Across the literature, several principles consistently emerge: deep employer engagement ensures the relevance and value of training; comprehensive support systems, including mentorship and coaching, help overcome barriers for marginalized groups; and modular credentials offer flexibility and clear signalling of skills (Digital Supercluster 2025). Ultimately, successful digital transformation requires organizational commitment that transcends isolated training initiatives, embedding digital competence within the organization's core structures and culture.



### Digital Transformation Strategies

#### Key Features

- Integrates digital tools and platforms
- Focuses on digital literacy and new technology skills
- Promotes agile, cross-functional teams

#### Implementation Steps

1. Assess the organization's digital skills baseline.
2. Deploy digital training platforms and resources.
3. Foster a culture of continuous digital learning.
4. Encourage collaboration across departments.
5. Measure digital adoption and impact.

**References:** Microsoft 2022; Moore 2025; Shahzad et al. 2025



## Data-Driven Workforce Planning Models

Data-driven workforce planning models have become a cornerstone of modern talent management, enabling organizations to proactively identify skill gaps, forecast future workforce needs, and align upskilling strategies with business objectives (Visier 2024). By leveraging advanced analytics, such as employee skills inventories, performance metrics, and real-time labour-market data, organizations can move beyond reactive hiring to develop targeted, personalized training programs that address specific competency gaps. Tools like AI-powered analytics and learning management systems further support this approach, allowing for the customization of learning pathways and ongoing tracking of employee progress. This results in more effective talent management, improved

training return on investment (ROI), and a workforce that is agile and well-prepared for evolving business demands (Visier 2024).

Several leading workforce development programs exemplify the impact of data-driven planning. The 4Cs Workforce Programs are continually refined using local labour-market analytics and employer feedback, ensuring that curricula align with in-demand skills in sectors such as healthcare, skilled trades, and mental health. This approach has produced exceptionally high job placement and certification pass rates, particularly benefiting BIPOC and immigrant learners through comprehensive wraparound supports that promote educational and career success (Housel et al. 2023).

### Data-Driven Workforce Planning Mini-Case Study:

## Royal Bank of Canada (RBC)

RBC has an Indigenous Peoples Development Program (IPDP) and a supporting RBC Indigenous Mentoring Experience (RIME), designed to empower Indigenous talent through real-world experience, community engagement, and measurable impact.

The IPDP is a two-year rotational program for recent college/university graduates who self-identify as First Nations, Inuit, or Métis. Rotations include:

- Eight months in a core RBC business (e.g., finance, risk, marketing, tech)
- Four months in an Indigenous community organization
- Six months in deeper functional skills within RBC
- Six months of upskilling in advanced areas

A crucial element of this program is one-on-one mentoring from the program manager, peers, and senior leaders, plus formal coaching, professional development, technical training, and volunteering (e.g., supporting One Drop's Indigenous reconciliation work). The specific structure of the program is as follows:

- Runs cohort-based over four months
- Matches Indigenous participants with mentors (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous)
- Monthly one-on-one sessions, plus small group cross-cultural discussions

**Feedback on the mentoring program is positive:** 95% of participants would recommend RIME, 100% of Indigenous mentees matched according to preferences, 100% satisfaction with cultural awareness sessions and many one-time mentees have become mentors.

Important takeaways include the importance of mentorship, opportunities for community integration and volunteering consistent with cultural norms, cohort-based training and mentoring, and clarity around skills development that is tied to career progression.

Merit America designs its fast, flexible technology and digital skills training based on labour-market trends and employer partnerships, focusing on high-growth tech roles and measurable wage outcomes (Brookings Institution 2019; Merit America 2023). The program supports adult learners balancing work and study, combining industry-recognized credentials with personalized coaching and job placement support. This data-driven, employer-informed approach enables low-wage workers to access family-sustaining tech careers without the time or cost of a traditional college degree (Merit America 2023).

JFF also leverages data-driven planning, continuously adapting its youth career pathway programs based on employer demand and workforce trends (JFF 2025; Zhong and Shetty 2021). JFF integrates technical training with work-based learning opportunities, such as internships and apprenticeships, while providing wraparound coaching and support. Their focus on equity, accountability, and continuous quality improvement ensures that underrepresented youth gain access to skilled, high-demand jobs through strong employer partnerships and responsive curriculum design (JFF 2025).

In Canada, NPower and ADaPT deliver employer-driven, co-designed technology training programs that are closely aligned with current labour-market needs (Future Skills Centre 2022; NPower Canada 2024). Ongoing employer engagement and workforce data analysis ensure that participants acquire in-demand skills for high-growth sectors, with inclusive recruitment practices targeting equity-deserving groups. Over 1,600 graduates have launched digital careers with Fortune 500 companies, reflecting strong job readiness and employment outcomes (NPower Canada 2024).

Sweden's Job Security Councils illustrate how sectoral labour-market analysis can inform nonprofit-led career support and retraining for workers facing job loss due to economic changes or restructuring (Brookings Institution 2019; OECD 2015). Funded by employer contributions and established through collective agreements, these councils achieve high rates of job continuity and effective workforce transitions by tailoring support to individual backgrounds and local labour-market needs (OECD 2015; Svenskt Näringsliv 2023).

Collectively, these examples highlight how data-driven workforce planning enhances organizational agility and competitiveness, as well as driving equity, career mobility, and successful adaptation to the demands of a rapidly changing labour market (Aspen Institute 2016).



## Data-Driven Workforce Planning

### Key Features

- Uses analytics to identify skills gaps
- Forecasts workforce needs
- Enables personalized upskilling
- Tracks return on investment (ROI) of training investments

### Implementation Steps

1. Collect and analyze employee skills and labour market data.
2. Identify gaps and forecast future workforce needs.
3. Develop targeted training and upskilling programs.
4. Use AI and learning management systems (LMS) to track progress.
5. Adjust workforce and training strategies based on measured outcomes.

**References:** Aspen Institute 2016; Visier 2024

# Moving Forward: Design Implications for Upskilling Programs

Recognizing the full scope of systemic barriers facing Black and Indigenous workers is not a theoretical exercise; it is a practical and ethical prerequisite for building effective, equitable, and scalable upskilling initiatives. Program design must go beyond addressing technical skill gaps and instead engage deeply with the structure and culture that shape access, participation, and outcomes.

**To do so, programs must be grounded in the following design principles:**

- Cultural safety and relevance
- Recognition of collective and community-oriented goals
- Flexibility to accommodate caregiving responsibilities, remote geographies, and digital divides
- Strengthening of formal and informal support networks
- Integration of Indigenous values, worldviews, and knowledge systems
- Accountability to Black and Indigenous communities through co-governance and participatory design

By centring the lived experiences of Black and Indigenous workers in Canada, we move toward a skills development model that prepares individuals to navigate exclusionary systems and challenges and transforms those systems in the process.

As Salmon, Chavez, and Murphy (2023) emphasize, culturally safe, community-driven approaches are essential for building trust and fostering engagement. For many Indigenous workers, success is not solely defined by individual career advancement but also by broader goals such as collective well-being, cultural affirmation, and community transformation. Upskilling programs that

reflect and honour these values are more likely to resonate with participants, achieve higher rates of completion, and lead to more sustainable and meaningful outcomes.

These insights have direct implications for program design. Initiatives must respect Indigenous cultural identities and reinforce the social networks and communal priorities that shape participants' decision-making. Many Indigenous workers and entrepreneurs prioritize the well-being of family and community over personal advancement, which should inform everything from curriculum content and delivery models to program messaging and recruitment strategies. Communications that acknowledge and affirm these priorities can help foster long-term commitment and deeper engagement.

Crucially, as Salmon, Chavez, and Murphy (2023) underscore, Indigenous Peoples are not a monolith. Effective programs must account for the diversity of Indigenous identities, geographies, and lived experiences across Canada. One-size-fits-all approaches are unlikely to succeed. Instead, program designers must commit to meaningful consultation, localized adaptation, and iterative feedback to ensure initiatives remain responsive, culturally grounded, and contextually appropriate.

By embedding these principles into the design and implementation of upskilling initiatives, we can support individual career transitions, systemic equity, and broader economic transformation.

# Retail Career Ladders and Digital Skills

## Career Ladders in Retail

To develop comprehensive training kits that effectively advance the target population up the career ladder, understanding the skill progression required at each stage is essential. The skills needed may differ depending on the specific role or desired direction of advancement, for example, training a sales associate for promotion requires a different approach than for other positions. By establishing clear design principles for upskilling and reskilling retail workers, we can create programs that support career progression. Therefore, as a first step, we identify and analyze the general skills required at each level of career advancement.



### Entry-Level Roles

Entry-level retail positions form the foundation of store operations, requiring a combination of customer service, technical proficiency, and product knowledge. Examples include retail associate, sales assistant, cashier, customer service representative, stock clerk, and merchandiser. These roles serve as the primary touchpoint between customers and the brand, making them essential to retail success.

### Senior Associate or Team Lead

These roles involve team coordination, opening/closing procedures, and basic supervisory responsibilities. Examples include shift leader, keyholder, senior sales associate, and lead stock associate.

### Store Leadership Path

The positions described below often progress into management of retail locations:

- **Assistant store manager:** Supports store manager in staffing, operations, and training.
- **Store manager:** Oversees full store operations, budget, team performance, and customer experience.
- **District/area manager:** Manages multiple store locations, focusing on sales performance and leadership development.
- **Regional manager / director of retail operations:** Leads broader regional strategy and performance oversight.

### Specialist Path (In-Store Expertise)

Instead of following a management path, employees may choose to focus on specialized in-store functions or customer experiences:

- **Visual merchandiser:** Designs store layouts and product displays.
- **Product expert / brand ambassador:** Specializes in product categories (e.g., tech, fashion).
- **Omnichannel specialist:** Manages click-and-collect, online orders, and digital service tools.
- **Training coordinator:** Onboards and trains new hires, often using digital learning tools.

**Skills required:** Subject matter knowledge, customer engagement, digital tools, product systems.

### Corporate Retail Path

Continuing the management path, employees may move into head office roles across various departments:

- **Human resource (HR) / talent development:** Recruits and trains employees.
- **Buying and merchandising:** Assists in analyzing trends, negotiating with suppliers, managing purchase orders, and tracking inventory levels.
- **Marketing / e-commerce:** Coordinates social media activities, as well as email marketing.
- **Supply chain / logistics:** Manage and optimize stock levels to maintain efficient retail operations.
- **Retail technology:** Analyze business needs and translate them into technical solutions that optimize retail operations.

**Skills required:** Advanced digital literacy, data analysis, cross-functional collaboration, strategic thinking.



In short, well defined career progression pathways mapped onto specific skills and competency requirements is core to upskilling and reskilling success, especially for Black and Indigenous retail workers.

## Digital Skills in Retail

Modern retail is increasingly digital, requiring frontline employees to be proficient with a variety of technologies that improve store operations, customer experience, and their own efficiency. The following outlines the critical digital competencies and specific skills frontline retail staff need to thrive.

### **SKILL:** Digital Literacy

**Goal:** Feel confident using everyday digital tools

#### **Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- **Basic computer skills:** navigating operating systems, email, and cloud-based tools (e.g., Google Workspace, Microsoft 365, Zoom, etc.)
- **Point-of-sale (POS) systems:** using modern touchscreen registers and integrated payment solutions
- **Mobile devices/tablets:** using apps for inventory, customer engagement, or internal communication
- **Staying organized:** digital calendars, task lists

### **SKILL:** POS/E-commerce Proficiency

**Goal:** Handle transactions confidently using modern POS systems

**? Why it matters:** Fast, smooth checkout creates a great customer experience

#### **Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- Operating touchscreen registers and mobile POS devices
- Managing digital receipts, refunds, and loyalty programs
- Troubleshooting basic POS issues

### **SKILL:** Inventory and Order Management Tools

**Goal:** Use digital tools to track stock and online orders

**? Why it matters:** More customers are using omnichannel

#### **Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- **Understanding online retail systems:** familiarity with platforms like Shopify, Amazon, SkipTheDishes, or proprietary store systems
- **Click-and-collect systems:** managing in-store pickup logistics
- **Digital order fulfillment:** tracking, packing, and shipping orders efficiently
- Using warehouse and logistics management systems (WMS/LMS)

**SKILL:** Data and Analytics Awareness

 **Goal:** Use store data to make smarter decisions

 **Why it matters:** Data helps you make better decisions

**Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- **Basic data interpretation:** using dashboards to monitor sales performance or customer trends and support store goals with data-driven actions
- **Customer insights tools:** understanding loyalty program metrics or customer feedback

**SKILL:** Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Customer Service Tools

 **Goal:** Support customers through new digital channels

 **Why it matters:** Customers expect fast, helpful support, even online

**Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- Chatting with customers via apps or live chat tools
- Using CRM systems
- Answering questions quickly through digital tools
- Using digital tools to offer personalized product recommendations
- Understanding customer loyalty apps and rewards programs

**SKILL:** Social Media and Digital Marketing (Basic Level)

 **Goal:** Represent the brand and connect with customers

 **Why it matters:** Your voice and presence help build brand loyalty

**Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- **Brand ambassadorship:** understanding how to represent the brand on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, creation of short videos or photos for promotion
- **Influencer-style content creation:** especially important in youth-oriented or fashion-focused retail roles (when part of the job)
- **Using social tools in-store:** QR codes or product scanning apps

**SKILL:** Cyber-security Awareness

 **Goal:** Keep customer and company data safe

 **Why it matters:** Safety online is just as important as in the store

**Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- Recognizing phishing and scams
- Using secure passwords and avoiding risky clicks
- Understanding privacy policies and how to handle data responsibly

**SKILL:** AI and Automation Tools (Emerging Skillset)

 **Goal:** Understand and work with new smart tools

 **Why it matters:** These tools help serve more customers with less hassle

**Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- **Using AI-powered customer tools:** like smart fitting rooms or virtual shopping assistants
- Interacting with robotics or self-checkout machines
- **Voice-activated systems:** possibly in logistics or customer queries

**SKILL:** Training and Development

 **Goal:** Understand how to access training and development resources, track career progression and credentials, understand next steps

 **Why it matters:** Upskilling itself is now a digital process, requiring comfort with tech-based learning

**Requirement Skills / Skills to Build:**

- Accessing and completing online learning modules
- Using virtual reality (VR) or simulation tools for training
- Participating in digital coaching platforms or mobile learning apps

# Proposed Retail Upskilling Model for Black and Indigenous Workers



## Career Pathway Mapping and Visibility

To ensure clear career progression and effective communication within retail organizations, it is essential to:

- **Clearly define and communicate career ladders:** Outline how entry-level positions can lead to supervisory, management, or specialist roles. This progression should be transparent and easy to understand for all employees.
- **Provide a centralized career mapping platform:** Implement a digital platform that visually maps out potential career trajectories within the organization. This platform should illustrate how upskilling and skill development directly connect to new roles and advancement opportunities.
- **Link upskilling to career growth:** Demonstrate explicitly how completing specific training or development programs enables employees to qualify for promotions, new responsibilities, or specialized positions.
- **Ensure job postings are transparent and informative:** Clearly state the required skills for each role and provide guidance on how employees can close any skill gaps through available training resources. This empowers employees to proactively prepare for career advancement.



## Personalizing Employee Development Programs

To maximize impact and engagement, employee development programs should be adaptable to individual needs and aspirations:

- **Conduct individual skills gap analyses:** Begin by assessing each employee's current

strengths and areas for growth. Use these insights to align training opportunities with their personal career goals.

- **Design tailored learning journeys:** Create customized development pathways based on employees' roles, interests, and long-term objectives. This ensures that learning is relevant and motivating.
- **Implement mentorship pairing:** Connect employees with mentors who can provide personalized guidance, constructive feedback, and valuable networking opportunities. This support helps employees envision and actively plan their career progression.



## Integrating Upskilling with Career Advancement

To maximize the impact of upskilling initiatives, organizations should create a seamless link between employee development and career progression:

- **Directly connect upskilling to advancement:** Clearly communicate that completing specific training programs or certifications makes employees eligible for promotions, salary increases, or expanded responsibilities. This transparency motivates participation and aligns learning with tangible rewards.
- **Identify and develop high-potential talent:** Use performance data and manager input to recognize employees with strong potential. Provide these individuals with targeted development plans that prepare them for future leadership or specialist roles.
- **Celebrate learning milestones:** Publicly acknowledge employees' achievements in skill development, such as course completions, certifications, or project successes. Recognizing these milestones

reinforces the organization's commitment to growth and encourages others to pursue similar paths.

- **Share success stories:** Regularly highlight real examples of employees who have advanced their careers through upskilling. Sharing these stories makes career growth feel attainable and inspires others to engage in their own development.

## **Delivery Methods: On-the-Job and Modular Learning**

When determining the appropriate method of delivery for training programs, two common approaches are on-the-job training and modular learning. The decision between delivering content online versus in person should be made after a careful assessment of the specific conditions at each geographical location.

The choice between online and in-person delivery methods depends on several factors:

- **Online delivery:** This mode is particularly advantageous in areas with a low population density, where gathering participants in one location may be impractical or costly. Online delivery allows for greater flexibility, enabling learners to access content regardless of their physical location. It is also beneficial when resources or expert trainers are not available locally, or when circumstances, such as travel restrictions or limited physical infrastructure, make in-person sessions challenging.
- **In-person delivery:** In-person training is ideal for geographical areas with a higher population density, where learners can conveniently attend sessions together. This method is recommended when hands-on practice, direct supervision, or immediate feedback is critical to learning objectives. Additionally, in-person sessions foster interactive group discussions, team building, and real-time support, which are often essential in certain training scenarios.



## **Culturally Responsive Mentorship and Peer Support**

**Action:** Pair participants with mentors, who are ideally individuals who share similar backgrounds or have lived experience to provide personalized guidance, encouragement, and advocacy. Culturally relevant mentorship fosters a strong sense of confidence, belonging, and practical navigation skills, which are especially vital for Indigenous and Black workers who may face systemic barriers. By connecting participants with relatable role models, mentorship empowers individuals to build resilience and successfully pursue their career goals.



## **Flexible, Blended Delivery**

**Action:** Implement a blended learning approach that integrates in-person coaching, digital learning platforms, and peer-led workshops.

Allow participants to progress at their own pace and formally recognize prior learning and existing skills. Structure skills training into small, flexible modules, such as microlearning, mobile learning, and bite-sized e-learning, which can be completed during work hours or between shifts.

This approach supports continuous learning on the job, accommodates variable schedules and enables learners to immediately apply new skills in their work environment. By combining multiple delivery methods and flexible scheduling, training becomes more accessible, relevant, and impactful for a diverse workforce.



## **Transferable Skills Emphasis**

**Action:** Prioritize training in both retail-specific skills (such as customer service, sales, and inventory management) and cross-sector skills (including digital literacy, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork). Building transferable skills not only supports long-term career development for participants but also equips them with the versatility to pursue opportunities within retail and in other industries. This broader skillset enhances employability, adaptability, and professional growth.



## **Employer and Community Partnerships**

**Action:** Engage employers in co-designing training programs and creating advancement opportunities, while collaborating with community organizations for outreach and comprehensive wraparound support. These partnerships ensure that training remains relevant and accessible to participants, directly connecting learning with real pathways to career mobility and sustained employment.

# Conclusion

**This report set out to design a strategic upskilling model for modern organizations, with particular attention to advancing Black and Indigenous workers in Canada’s retail sector and strengthening their digital skills. We next presented the business and equity case for investment, mapped persistent labour market barriers, reviewed leading upskilling models, and proposed a retail upskilling model tailored to the needs and aspirations of Black and Indigenous workers.**

Three overarching conclusions emerge from this synthesis. First, upskilling is not a neutral technical exercise focused solely on “closing skills gaps.” For Black and Indigenous workers, current labour market outcomes are shaped by the interaction of racialized wage gaps, sectoral stratification, discrimination, precarious work, and differential exposure to automation, alongside digital divides and caregiving burdens. Treating low wages and occupational segregation as problems of individual deficits obscures the underlying structures of colonialism and systemic racism that continue to constrain access to stable, high quality employment (Banerjee and Tedmanson 2010; Salmon, Chavez, and Murphy 2023). Any credible upskilling strategy must therefore address organizational culture, HR practices and power relations rather than narrowly focusing on technical training.

Second, effective and equitable upskilling for Indigenous workers cannot be designed around only individualistic notions of success. Indigenous management scholarship shows that Indigenous entrepreneurs and workers frequently prioritize community well-being, cultural continuity, and relational obligations, alongside income and career advancement (Peredo and McLean 2013; Ruwhiu et al. 2021). Cultural safety and cultural satisfaction at work highlight that participation, retention, and performance depend on whether employees experience workplaces as safe, respectful, and aligned with their identities and responsibilities (Haar and Brougham 2011; Rich and Giles 2015). The report therefore positions cultural safety, Indigenous governance, and

alignment with the TRC’s Calls to Action as necessary conditions for upskilling that are effective and ethically defensible.

Third, the comparative review of upskilling models demonstrates that there is robust evidence for what works when equity is explicitly prioritized. Competency based programs, experiential and collaborative learning, lifelong learning ecosystems, digital transformation strategies, and data-driven workforce planning converge on a common set of design features: deep employer co-design and labour market alignment; modular, stackable, industry recognized credentials; work integrated learning; strong mentorship and peer support; and comprehensive wraparound services for equity deserving groups (Klein Collins 2012; Kolb 1984; OECD 2023; World Economic Forum 2025). International examples such as NPower Canada, Digital: Introducing Black Canadians to Tech Skills & Jobs, Sweden’s Job Security Councils, and Singapore’s WSQ system show that when these features are combined, programs can achieve high completion, substantial wage gains, and durable employment outcomes for populations that have historically been excluded from high growth sectors.

The proposed upskilling model for retail translates these insights into a practical framework for the Canadian retail market. It maps clear career ladders from entry-level roles through store leadership to specialist and corporate positions, and ties each step to explicit competencies, with digital skills as a core foundation rather than an

optional add on. It recommends competency based, modular training integrated into work; individualized learning plans linked to transparent promotion and pay criteria; culturally responsive mentorship and peer cohorts; flexible blended delivery that accommodates geography and care responsibilities; and deliberate development of transferable skills that support mobility within and beyond retail. These elements are anchored in employer and community co-governance and underpinned by data-driven workforce planning that tracks outcomes disaggregated by identity and geography.

The implications for practice are clear. Employers should move from ad hoc training to structured, competency based pathways that explicitly connect learning to advancement, while embedding cultural safety and anti racism into leadership, HR, and performance management systems. Training providers and intermediaries should co-design curricula with Black- and Indigenous-led organizations and employers, align content with transparent retail career ladders and

digital skill needs, and provide mentorship and supports required to sustain participation. Policymakers and funders should prioritize portable training rights, incentivize employer participation in equity centred upskilling, and require identity disaggregated metrics and evaluation frameworks to monitor impact over time (OECD 2020; UNESCO 2025).

Overall, the analysis supports a shift in how organizations, educators, and policymakers conceptualize upskilling. Rather than preparing individuals to better navigate exclusionary systems, an equity centred approach treats upskilling as a lever to transform those systems, redistributing opportunity, building culturally safe workplaces, and strengthening digital readiness across the retail sector. If implemented with fidelity to the design principles articulated here, the proposed model can help advance Black and Indigenous workers along the retail career ladder, improve organizational performance, and contribute to a more inclusive and innovative Canadian economy.

# References

- Agarwal, A., et al. 2024. Gaps in active measures programs among Black people in Canada: Final report. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation.
- Amazon. 2021. Black Business Accelerator.
- Amazon. 2023. RME Mechatronics & Robotics Apprenticeship. Amazon Apprenticeships.
- Amazon Technical Academy. 2023. Program overview and outcomes.
- Anderson, R., L. P. Dana, and T. E. Dana. 2006. Indigenous land rights, entrepreneurship, and economic development in Canada: “Opting-in” to the global economy. *Journal of World Business*, 41, 45–55.
- Aspen Institute. 2016. Working together to strengthen America’s immigrant workforce.
- Aspen Institute. 2021. Upskilling playbook: Types of upskilling.
- Banerjee, S., and D. Tedmanson. 2010. Grass burning under our feet: Indigenous enterprise development in a political economy of whiteness. *Management Learning*, 41, 147–165.
- Bjursell, C., and A. C. Ramsten. 2020. University-industry collaboration to support lifelong education. In *INTED2020 proceedings* (6059–6068). IATEaQD Academy.
- Bohonos, J. W. 2021. Workplace hate speech and rendering Black and Native lives as if they do not matter: A nightmarish autoethnography. Organization.
- Boston Consulting Group. 2018. How diverse leadership teams boost innovation. BCG. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/how-diverse-leadership-teams-boost-innovation>
- Broady, K. E., Booth-Bell, D., Coupet, J., & Macklin, M. 2021. Race and jobs at risk of being automated in the age of COVID-19. Washington, DC: The Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution.
- Brookings Institution. 2019. Realism about reskilling: Upgrading the career prospects of America’s low-wage workers.
- Burch, G. F., et al. 2019. A meta-analysis of the relationship between experiential learning and learning outcomes. *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 17(3), 239–273.
- Burgess, J., & Dyer, S. 2009. Workplace mentoring for Indigenous Australians: A case study. *Equal Opportunities International*, 28(6), 465–485.
- Butler, M. G., K. S. Church, and A. W. Spencer. 2019. Do, reflect, think, apply: Experiential education in accounting. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 47, 27–38.
- Cahn, M. 2008. Indigenous entrepreneurship, culture and micro-enterprise in the Pacific Islands: Case studies from Samoa. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 20, 1–18.
- Camacho-Zuñiga, C. 2025. Lifelong learning and digital skills in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
- Carnevale, A. P., N. Smith, and J. Strohl. 2013. Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Chan, H. H. K., et al. 2021. Effects of experiential learning programmes on empathy, prosocial behaviour, and subjective well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis.
- Cinelli, R. L., and L. R. Peralta. 2015. “Achievement, pride and inspiration”: Outcomes for volunteer role models in a community outreach program in remote Aboriginal communities. *Rural and Remote Health*, 15, 3482.
- Cukier, W., S. Findlay, and M. Lee. 2023. School-to-work transitions: PSE graduates’ labour market outcomes by identity. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
- Digital Supercluster. 2025. Introducing Black Canadians to tech skills & jobs.
- Domey N. and N. Patsiurko. 2024. The diversity of the Black populations in Canada, 2021: A sociodemographic portrait. Ethnicity, Language and Immigration Thematic Series, Statistics Canada.

- Down, S. 2012. Evaluating the impacts of government policy through the long view of life history. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 24, 619–639.
- Eva, C., et al. 2025. Making Indigenous employment everyone's business: Indigenous employment and retention in non-Indigenous-owned businesses. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*.
- Foster, L., et al. 2023. Black Canadian national survey: Final report. Institute for Social Research, York University.
- Future Skills Centre. 2022. Advanced Digital and Professional Training (ADaPT) evaluation report. Toronto, ON: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FSC-ADAPT-Final.pdf>
- Gloat. 2023. The business impact of workforce agility.
- Gunewardena, D., and A. Seck. 2020. Heterogeneity in entrepreneurship in developing countries: Risk, credit, and migration and the entrepreneurial propensity of youth and women. *Review of Development Economics*, 24, 713–725.
- Haar, J., and D. Brougham. 2011. Consequences of cultural satisfaction at work: A study of New Zealand Maori. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 49, 461–475.
- Haar, J., and D. Brougham. 2020. Work antecedents and consequences of work-life balance: A two sample study within New Zealand. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33, 784–807.
- Haar, J., and W. J. Martin. 2021. He aronga takirua: Cultural double-shift of Maori scientists. *Human Relations*, 75.
- Hasan, M., M. Rahman, and M. Hossain. 2024. Employee upskilling and organizational performance: Empirical evidence from the technology sector.
- Henry, E., and R. Wolfgramm. 2018. Relational leadership—An Indigenous Mori perspective. *Leadership*, 14, 203–219.
- Henry, E., L. Dana, and P. Murphy. 2018. Telling their own stories: Maori entrepreneurship in the mainstream screen industry. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 30, 118–145.
- Housel, J., et al. 2023. A case study of innovative workplace development programming at community colleges in the United States.
- Huang, G., C. Fowler, and R. Baskerville. 2016. Entering the accounting profession: The operationalization of ethnicity-based discrimination. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 29, 1342–1366.
- Imas, J. M., N. Wilson, and A. Weston. 2012. Barefoot entrepreneurs. *Organization*, 19, 563–585.
- ISED (Innovation, Science and Economic Development) Canada. 2025. Government of Canada to bring high-speed Internet access to Saskatchewan communities. <https://www.canada.ca/en/innovation-science-economic-development/news/2025/07/government-of-canada-to-bring-high-speed-internet-access-to-saskatchewan-communities.html>
- Jenkins, J. 1977. Government policy and native entrepreneurship in the Canadian north. *Business Quarterly*, 42, 68–75.
- JFF (Jobs for the Future). 2025. Building equitable pathways data enabler.
- Klein-Collins, R. 2012. Competency-based degree programs in the U.S.: Postsecondary credentials for measurable student learning and performance. CAEL.
- Klyver, K., and D. Foley. 2012. Networking and culture in entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 24, 561–588.
- Kolb, D. A. 1984. *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*.
- Le Deist, F. D., and J. Winterton. 2005. What is competence? *Human Resource Development International*, 8(1), 27–46.
- LinkedIn Learning. 2019. *Workforce Learning Report*. LinkedIn.
- Loblaw Companies Ltd. 2024. Diversity, equity, and inclusion page.
- Logue, D., et al. 2018. Social enterprise to social value chain: Indigenous entrepreneurship transforming the native food industry in Australia. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 24, 312–328.

- Macpherson, W., et al. 2021. Indigenous entrepreneurship: Insights from Chile and New Zealand. *Journal of Business Research*, 127, 77–84.
- Marriott International. 2025. Voyage global leadership development program.
- Matias, D., et al. 2018. Commercializing traditional non-timber forest products: An integrated value chain analysis of honey from giant honey bees in Palawan, Philippines. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 97, 223–231.
- McKinsey & Company. 2022. The rise of the inclusive consumer. February 7, 2022.
- McPhee, D., et al. 2017. Smudging, connecting, and dual identities: Case study of an Aboriginal ERG. *Personnel Review*, 46, 1104–1119.
- Mercer. 2025. Global talent trends 2024–2025.
- Merit America. 2023. Program outcomes and alumni data.
- Microsoft. 2022. Microsoft and LinkedIn launch a program to help 10 million people learn digital skills.
- Moore, K. 2025. The human-centric approach to digital transformation. *Forbes*.
- Morgan McKinley. 2025. Skill gap analysis: Tools, techniques, and the path forward for employers.
- Murphy, M., et al. 2020. From principles to action: Community-based entrepreneurship in the Toquaht Nation. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 35, 106051.
- Neiman Marcus Group. 2023. Our journey to revolutionize impact: ESG report 2023.
- Nicholson, M., R. Hoye, and D. Gallant. 2011. The provision of social support for elite Indigenous athletes in Australian football. *Journal of Sport Management*, 25, 131–142.
- NPower Canada. 2023. Annual impact report.
- NPower Canada. 2024. DIGITAL, Canada's Global Innovation Cluster for digital technologies: Canadian Tech Talent Accelerator. Phase 2 report, fall 2023.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). 2015. Back to work: Sweden.
- OECD. 2020. Individualising training access schemes: France – the Compte Personnel de Formation (Personal Training Account – CPF). Paris: OECD Publishing. [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/07/l-individualisation-des-dispositifs-d-acces-a-la-formation-l-exemple-francais-du-compte-personnel-de-formation\\_cbe40f74/301041f1-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/07/l-individualisation-des-dispositifs-d-acces-a-la-formation-l-exemple-francais-du-compte-personnel-de-formation_cbe40f74/301041f1-en.pdf)
- OECD. 2023. Skills outlook 2023: Skills for a resilient workforce.
- Peredo, A. 2003. Emerging strategies against poverty—The road less traveled. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 12, 155–166.
- Peredo, A., and M. McLean. 2013. Indigenous development and the cultural captivity of entrepreneurship. *Business & Society*, 52, 592–620.
- Pichette, J., Tamburri, R., McKeown, J., Blair, K. A. W., & MacKay, E. 2019. Lifelong learning in Ontario: Improved options for mid-career, underserved learners. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
- PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers). 2023. New world, new skills: Digital academy and accelerator.
- Raconteur. 2024. AI in HR: How one company transformed their workforce.
- Randstad. 2024. Randstad certified mentor – Credly.
- Rich, K., and A. Giles. 2015. Managing diversity to provide culturally safe sport programming: A case study of the Canadian Red Cross's swim program. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29, 305–317.
- Richard, O., M. del C. Triana, and M. Li. 2020. Racial diversity congruence in upper and lower management and firm productivity. *Academy of Management Journal*.
- Ruwhiu, D., et al. 2021. Success factors of Maori entrepreneurs: A regional perspective. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 27, 41–61.

- Salmon, E., J. F. Chavez, and M. Murphy. 2023. New perspectives and critical insights from Indigenous peoples' research: A systematic review of Indigenous management and organization literature. *Academy of Management Annals*, 17(2), 439–491. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2021.0132>
- Sattler, P., & Peters, J. 2013. Work-integrated learning in Ontario's postsecondary sector: The experience of Ontario graduates. Toronto, ON: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. [https://heqco.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2020/03/WIL\\_Experience\\_ON\\_Graduates\\_ENG.pdf](https://heqco.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2020/03/WIL_Experience_ON_Graduates_ENG.pdf)
- Scott, K. 2025. Still struggling: Racialized workers in the post-pandemic labour market. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/still-struggling-racialized-workers-in-the-post-pandemic-labour-market/>
- Shahzad, K., Imran, M., & Butt, A. N. 2025. Digital transformation and changes in organizational structure. *Research-Technology Management*, 68(3), 34–44.
- SkillsFuture Singapore. 2023. Skills demand for the future economy 2023/24. <https://www.skillsfuture.gov.sg/docs/default-source/skills-report-2023/sdfe-2023.pdf>
- Socha, M. January 18, 2024. Fixing retail's leadership diversity problem. *Vogue Business*. <https://www.voguebusiness.com/story/companies/fixing-retails-leadership-diversity-problem>.
- Statistics Canada. 2022. The Daily.
- Statistics Canada. 2024. The Daily.
- Svenskt Näringsliv. 2023. TRANSITION+SUPPORT+2023.
- Swedish Job Security Councils. 2023. Model and outcomes.
- Tan, J. 2016. Lifelong learning through the SkillsFuture movement in Singapore: Challenges and prospects.
- Tapsell, P., and C. Woods. 2010. Social entrepreneurship and innovation: Self-organization in an Indigenous context. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 22, 535–556.
- Ted Rogers School of Management, Diversity Institute, and Future Skills Centre. 2023. Labour market implications for racialized youth.
- TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada). 2015. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to action.
- Tretiakov, A., et al. 2020. Family, community, and globalization: Wayuu Indigenous entrepreneurs as n-Culturals. *Cross Cultural & Strategic Management*, 27, 189–211.
- Truhon, S. 2008. Equal opportunity climate in the United States military: Are differences in the eye of the beholder? *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 17, 153–169.
- UNESCO. 2025. Personal Training Account (compte personnel de formation – CPF), France.
- UpSkill America, Aspen Institute. 2025. Upskilling Playbook 3: Types of Upskilling.
- Visier. 2024. The 5 steps of analytics-driven workforce planning.
- Warren, L., J. Mika, and F. Palmer. 2017. How does enterprise assistance support Maori entrepreneurs? An identity approach. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 23, 873–885.
- White, A. L., et al. 2016. Accelerated training of skilled birth attendants in a marginalized population on the Thai-Myanmar border: A multiple methods program evaluation. *PLOS ONE*, 11(10), e0164363.
- Widjojo, H., and S. Gunawan. 2020. Indigenous tradition: An overlooked encompassing-factor in social entrepreneurship. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 11, 88–110.
- Wilkinson, M., M. Fogarty, and D. Melville. 1996. Organizational culture change through training and cultural immersion. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 9, 69.
- World Economic Forum. 2023 Putting skills first: A framework for action. .
- World Economic Forum. 2025. The future of jobs report 2025.
- Zhong, M., & T. Shetty. 2021. Diversity, equity and inclusion in responsive career pathways. *Blueprint & Future Skills Centre*.