

Positioning Ontario's Workforce for Recovery in Evolving Times

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At the Economic Developers Council of Ontario 2021 Annual Conference "EvolveOn", Tyler Cenac and Marilyn Mills students in the post-graduate Public Administration Program at Seneca College, summarized the workshop entitled "Positioning Ontario's Workforce for Recovery in Evolving Times".

The session was moderated by Kadie Ward, Commissioner at the Pay Equity Office of Ontario. Speakers included Monte McNaughton - Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development, Louise Taylor Green - CEO of the Human Resources Professionals Association, and Daniel Safayeni - Acting Vice President of Policy at the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a crippling impact on the labour market in Ontario. The province is facing historically high unemployment rates, ongoing workplace health and safety issues and disproportionate skill gaps across various regions, sectors and social groups. The Minister of Labour, the CEO of the Human Resources Professional Association (HRPA) and the acting Vice President of Policy at the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (CCO) presented solutions to combat this crisis at the EDCO conference. The road to recovery requires a flexible approach. Policy solutions must be informed by comprehensive data that reflects the unique needs of communities across the province.

Keywords: *COVID-19 Labour Market Recovery, Employment Policy, Skills Gap, Skilled Trades, HRPA, CCO, EDCO EvolveON, PPP, DEI, OCC*

Introduction

The session titled "Positioning Ontario's Workforce for Recovery in Evolving Times," at the 2021 EDCO Conference focused on the province's employment and labour issues in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The historically high unemployment rate, skill gap, health and safety concerns, and issues of diversity, equity and inclusion are just a few notable examples. While the province has introduced new policies to address these issues, there are regional and sector specific disparities which require innovative interventions from the municipal government.

1) Monte McNaughton - Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development

Minister McNaughton described a data-driven but flexible approach used by the province to set labour policy priorities and develop recovery programs. On a macro level, the high unemployment rate is perhaps the most concerning issue, especially considering that this number was at an all-time low before the pandemic began. Health and safety is also a key concern. Public health restrictions designed to stop the spread of the virus have arguably caused this mass unemployment, yet workplaces still remain the second leading cause of COVID-19 infections in the province. Before any plan for recovery can begin, comprehensive safety measures must be put in place. Additionally, the nature of economic production has drastically

shifted over the last few decades leaving both workers and businesses without the skills needed to stay competitive. This is especially prevalent in the skilled trades. To address these issues, the following policy measures were announced by the Minister during the panel discussion:

1. Skills development and training fund for training delivery providers to develop innovative solutions for retraining workers to adapt to changing economic needs and pressures, specifically in the skilled trades sector;
2. Programs to expand the Apprenticeship Pathway Program to help young people connect with skilled trade opportunities; and
3. Money to make training for skilled trades more accessible. This includes increasing financial support for people who are not eligible for unemployment benefits while attending in-class training, launching a new non-repayable tools grant for new trades workers, funds to assist colleges and training organizations purchase PPE, and set up safe online or in-class options for learning.

There are six key components to the province's framework for recovery:

1. Belief that access to meaningful and stable employment is the key to a thriving society and a critical part of any economic recovery plan;
2. Lens of physical and psychological safety to ensure workers that health and safety is prioritized;
3. Investment in promoting innovation among training providers and looking to rely on public-private partnerships (PPP) to deliver programs;
4. Rejection of a one-size-fits-all approach and instead prioritizes local community needs;
5. Backed by reliable and comprehensive data; and
6. Programs must be flexible and must promote flexibility in the labour market.

Each component of this framework is essential as the idea of flexibility is not entirely new and worth critiquing. Given the rapidly changing state of the pandemic, flexible policy making is crucial. However, "in the dominant stream of policy thinking" flexibility in labour market policy has been used as a "euphemism for ease of hire and fire" which ultimately places workers in more precarious positions (Crouch). Nevertheless, the Minister is optimistic about the future outlook and is confident that the province can use its many assets to build from as it looks to restore previous levels of labour market success.

2) Louise Taylor Green - CEO of the Human Resources Professional Association (HRPA)

Louise Taylor Green explained that Human Resource (HR) professionals will play a critical role in the employment recovery process as they are trained to support workplaces in re-opening and re-establishing business operations. This includes recalling laid off workers, upskilling or re-orienting workers to restructured work environments and ensuring that legislative obligations are upheld.

Green emphasized that efforts to restore the economy cannot be undertaken without intentional consideration of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on different social groups. Women, for example, are more likely to have been laid off and have fewer employment alternatives as they are

also more likely to hold precarious jobs. Issues of discrimination have become even more visible during the pandemic and HR professionals play a key role in ensuring that different social groups have equitable and fair access to jobs. Lastly, HR professionals work strategically to ensure that businesses have the resources, human capital, and guidance to operate in a safe and effective way.

While a global pandemic caused by a new and deadly virus is a uniquely frightening situation, past disruptions in the economy can provide direction on how Ontario's workforce can be re-established. In 2008, Hamilton's healthcare sector was experiencing major vacancies. In response, a research initiative to evaluate the community's skills and sources of human capital was completed. It showed that Hamilton's dominant sector had shifted from steel and manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy over a decade. The workforce, however, had not changed and many did not have the skills to meet the growing demand for these jobs, causing widespread displacement of workers. This research provided reliable projections about the knowledge, skills, and job growth expected in the community. It allowed the municipality to partner with industry, education and workforce development councils to establish reskilling programs.

This example carries meaningful and actionable implications for Ontario's workforce recovery planning. Local workforce development councils should identify current and projected economic impacts per industry in their community and should analyze the types and sources of local talent and skill. This will determine if the local workforce has the experience and skills to fulfil post-pandemic jobs in growing sectors. Labour and skills training policies can then be implemented to help with reskilling and can also facilitate equitable employment practices.

3) Daniel Safayeni - Acting VP of Policy at the Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC)

Daniel Safayeni leads the Ontario Economic Report for the OCC, a body that represents businesses, local boards of trades, and chambers of commerce. The results from the latest 2020 report show that the pandemic has had very disproportionate impacts by sector and by region. Sectors which require face-to-face interaction, like accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, recreation, and retail, have been hardest hit by the pandemic. This holds great social implications as the people most likely to be employed in these positions are facing much higher unemployment impacts. For example, young women (ages 15-24) are predicted to be the furthest returning to pre-pandemic levels of unemployment, and lower income and racialized Ontarians are experiencing disproportionate financial pressures and cases of COVID infections. These trends highlight the need for policies that are flexible enough to adapt to local needs, and which can facilitate equitable access to growing industries and stable employment.

The impact of the pandemic on the economy also differs by region. For example, the Hamilton-Niagara, Northern Ontario and Windsor-Essex regions have experienced some of the lowest business confidence levels and largest employment impacts. This can be attributed partly to the decline in cross-border trade and tourism in these areas. Small businesses have suffered the most as they have experienced great job losses and capital. Based on these disproportionate impacts, Safayeni emphasized

that economic recovery will not be the same across different communities, and thus a one size fits all policy approach would be unwise.

Lastly, Safayeni explained that economic projections must be analysed to predict how various sectors will look post-pandemic. Bank projections show that there will be a rebound in the latter half of 2021, both in GDP and employment numbers. While this will not be as high as pre-pandemic levels, growth is expected in sectors that have significantly declined. This is based on successful rollout of vaccinations and easing of public health restrictions. Despite the decline in business, 60% of businesses are confident that they will be able to succeed if provided industrial commons. These include services that foster growth such as broadband access and road infrastructure especially for areas like Northern Ontario that depend on trade.

Conclusion

While some of these issues began long before the public health emergency, COVID-19 has exacerbated many of these problems and disproportionately spread out the impacts across different sectors and regions. Nevertheless, all panellists remain confident that with these new challenges present new opportunities to refocus the province's employment policies and training opportunities. As the Minister advised, local programs must meet the needs of a changing labour market, workers, and business owners in an equitable and fair way.

Works Cited

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