



The Calgary Talent Lab

The Problem

Calgary is facing revolutionary changes to how its people live, work, and learn. Technology, globalization, supply chain and resource disruptions, and the structural impact of the pandemic are contributing to seismic economic and social change in our city.

As a city, Calgary has faced the volatility and uncertainty of depending on the oil and gas sector for much of the past century. But now, it's different. Calgary's economy is rapidly transitioning, and so are the demands of its employers. Every city's competitiveness depends on its ability to retain, attract, and develop talent. Now with its economy in transition, how can Calgary efficiently align its resources to innovate a learning system in which talent can think creatively, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world?

If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself.

Henry Ford

The Solution

To meet this rapid pace and size of change, Calgary must commit to being a city with a learning system as dynamic as every Calgarian. This learning system must foster Calgarians' specific skills needed to succeed in diverse occupations and sectors. It must also cultivate an adaptive capacity in individuals that helps transition between different occupations and sectors.

An agile and adaptive learning system designed to deliver priorities at the city-level demands a mechanism to enable systematic harmonization, collaboration, and innovation. This proposed mechanism is **The Calgary Talent Lab** (referred to herein as "the Lab"). The Lab will be an independent non-profit entity mandated with identifying, resourcing, testing, and scaling innovations in skills development. The Lab will be a place for employers, skills developers, policymakers, researchers, and learners to collaborate and work together to accelerate Calgary's skills development. To stimulate and deepen the culture of collaboration, the Lab will bring together innovative thinkers and doers from across the ecosystem to deliver Canada's most agile and adaptive labour force.

Competencies for Life

In March 2021, Calgary City Council approved the *LearningCITY* community pilot. This project piloted the introduction of the **Competencies for Life** (C4L), a set of 25 competencies to provide a harmonized framework and language for both skills developers and learners to reflect on the specific enabling skills developed.

The C4L project was led by a team of students from a range of postsecondary institutions and supported by 15 diverse community partners, including the Calgary Public Library, the Genesis Centre, and the Centre for Newcomers.

Key Insights

1. For C4L to achieve scale, a critical mass of employers and skills developers must commit to embedding C4L into their workplace and programming.
2. The C4L should be flexible to support a diverse array of educators and skills developers.
3. Harmonized skills assessment and certification are essential for C4L to achieve scale.

This is an example of an ecosystem level project that has been catalyzed through the community but could see similar pilots being resourced through the Talent Lab model.

3,063

The number of learning and skill development organizations in Calgary

30,870

The number of skills development programs offered annually in Calgary

3.5M

The number of experiences delivered annually in the creative arts

A System-Level Challenge

The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage.

Over three decades ago, Arie de Geus, the then head of Royal Dutch Shell's Strategic Planning Group, argued that a company's competitive position is defined by its capacity to learn faster than its competition. In today's highly competitive market for talent, this is now the guiding principle for modern cities.

As evidence, Calgary paradoxically faces both a skills surplus and a skills deficit. *Calgary Economic Development* projects that half of the jobs performed by Calgarians today could be at risk of automation over the next 20 years. Moreover, with the half-life of skills becoming shorter and shorter, Calgarians will be required to go through a continuous cycle of learning, unlearning, and relearning.

Over the past five years, diverse organizations ranging from *Calgary Economic Development*, *Calgary Arts Development*, the *Calgary Chamber of Commerce*, the *Business Council of Alberta*, the *CityXLab*, and others have studied ways to close this gap. However, one of the more significant challenges the city faces is the reality that the learning system is highly change-resistant and is rooted in traditions dating back to the industrial revolution and before. The result is our learning system is designed for volume and efficiency rather than agility.

Trusted Skills

In 2022, Calgary Arts Development Authority, in partnership with Calgary Economic Development and the Calgary Marketing Association, launched four decoupled **Trusted Skills** professional skills certifications. Trusted Skills certification only judges the evidence of skills, not how they were developed.

Key Insights

1. There is demand for decoupled certification across a variety of sectors.
2. The legitimacy of certification is anchored to the trust of the certifying body.
3. Employers' demand for the certification is essential to creating the pull for individuals to pursue certification.
4. Assessing and certifying job-specific skills efficiently with a high level of rigour is feasible.
5. The ability to assess and certify some non-contextual enabling skills (e.g., creativity) remains uncertain.

This is an example of an ecosystem level project that has been catalyzed through the community but could see similar pilots being resourced through the Talent Lab model.

102

The number of head offices in Calgary — the highest per capita in Canada

40%

Percentage of labour market who are from racialized communities

90,000

The number of postsecondary students studying in Calgary

To deliver an agile and adaptive labour force, Calgary must possess an agile and adaptive learning system. When we think of learning, we think of a classroom, a legacy of the industrial era of learning.

How Calgarians develop new skills has never been limited to a classroom. In fact, people are continuously learning, at work, volunteering, or when attending a religious service, art class or playing sports, reading a book, or listening to a podcast.

A recent [study](#) found that Calgary's certified and non-certified learning system incorporates 3,063 organizations, delivering 30,870 programs and over 3.5 million experiences annually. This study concluded that this "system" is not really a system (parts that work together); rather, it is a fragmented series of isolated learning experiences, often with vague learning outcomes. To deliver the skills to compete, we need to radically redefine when and how we will learn.

Open Innovation

Over the past two decades, other sectors have faced similar disruptions. For example, the technology sector has been revolutionized through a model known as open innovation. Open innovation recognizes that innovation is unlocked by empowering people to collaborate.

An example of open innovation is the introduction of the Apple App store. The App store (and later the Google Play store) revolutionized software development by providing a technical and economic platform to accelerate collaboration and innovation. This resulted in unlocking system capacity as any software developer could now develop, distribute, and monetize innovative software. The mobile app sector rapidly expanded from a few hundred to over five million apps developed by an estimated [nine million](#) developers.

Similarly, when car-sharing companies, such as Uber and Lyft, entered the transportation marketplace, the near-monopolies of taxi companies and public transit ended. Their entry did not disrupt the transportation marketplace; they redefined it by empowering millions of individuals to monetize their existing personal vehicles.

How can Calgary leverage open innovation to deliver an agile and adaptive learning system?

3,833

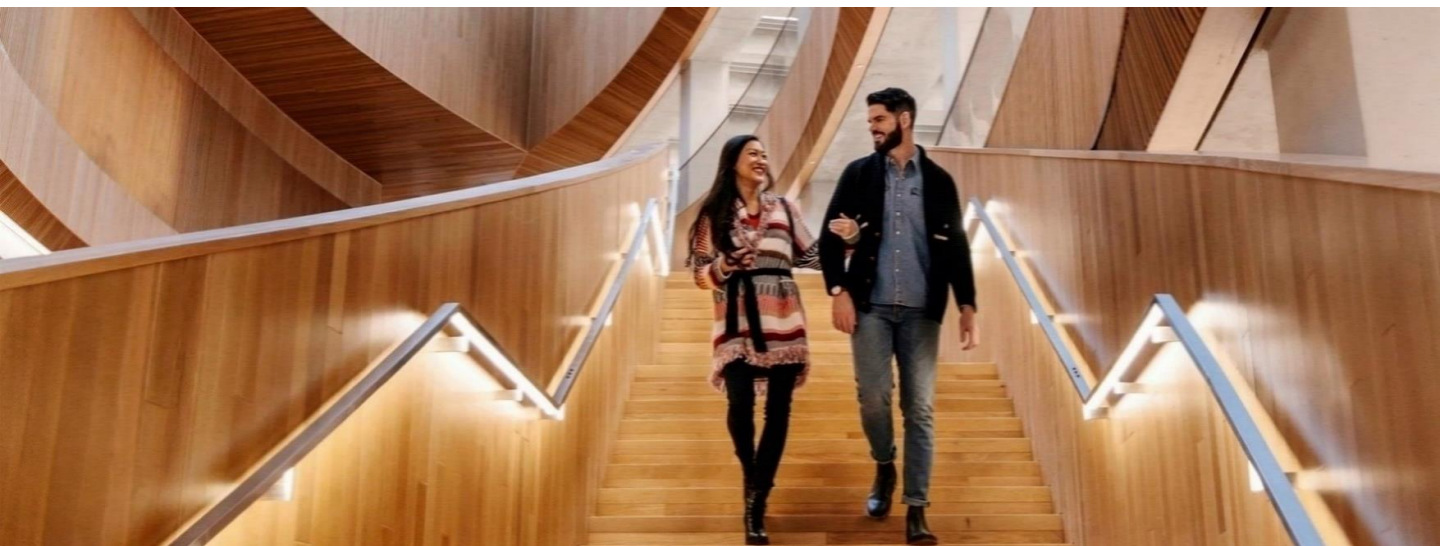
The [number](#) of programs delivered annually by community and social organizations

75%

The [percentage](#) of skills development organizations are non-profit or for-profit.

70%

The [percentage](#) of skills development organizations that have less than 100 employees.



System-Level Innovation

Open innovation empowers collaboration and co-creation and often inverts the business model from being centred around the priorities of organizations to one centred on people. A learning system centred around the demands of individual learners requires high-level alignment between diverse stakeholders, including employers, skills developers, policymakers, researchers, and learners. This starts with designing intentional processes to advance harmonization, collaboration, and innovation across the full learning system. In sum, this system-level challenge demands a system-level solution.

Since 2019, facilitated by *Calgary Economic Development* and the *CityXLab*, the *LearningCITY* initiative has evolved as the hub for system-level initiatives, securing funding, and facilitating collaborative research. We have also been conducting small-scale experiments, including *Competencies for Life*, *Trusted Skills*, and, most recently, Calgary's three-year *Work-Integrated Learning Pilot*.

The Calgary Talent Lab

To unlock the potential of open innovation, it's time for Calgary to transition from an ad hoc model to establishing a hub to identify, field test, evaluate, and scale innovations in learning and skills development. We propose this new hub be the **Calgary Talent Lab**.

The *Calgary Talent Lab* will be guided by the principles of a Skunk Works project. Skunk Works projects are structurally removed from institutional processes and culture to accelerate innovation and thinking beyond the status quo. This was how Lockheed Martin developed the first U.S. fighter jet, how Microsoft created the Xbox, and how Nike designed the Air Jordan.

Adapting these principles to be community-led, the *Calgary Talent Lab* will be **removed and independent** of the structures and cultures of the current learning system. To rapidly expand the culture of collaboration and innovation, the Lab needs to be open and accessible to a mix of innovative thinkers and doers from across the ecosystem.

These thinkers and doers would be guided by a governance board, supported by the Lab Secretariat (a permanent staff team), be complemented by flexible community secondments from diverse contexts, including employers, skills developers, policymakers, researchers, and learners via work integrated learning experiences. *The Calgary Talent Lab* is designed to complement existing institutional, occupational, or sector-level initiatives by identifying, resourcing, testing, and scaling skills development innovations with system-level potential.

The *Calgary Talent Lab's* goal would be to foster collaboration and break down silos to accelerate innovations to deliver a learning system that develops exceptional, creative, and adaptable talent, ready to thrive in a fast-changing world.

Skunk Works Principles

1. The project must be fully independent and removed from day-to-day corporate oversight.
2. There must be mutual trust between project funders and the project team.
3. To stimulate divergent thinking, the project team must be diverse and interdisciplinary.
4. To maximize agility, the project team must be small.
5. To empower individuals and promote open innovation, there must be limited hierarchy.
6. To support replication and scaling, all processes must be rigorously documented.

Systems-level Change in Action

Breaking Silos

The Lab will be a forum for collaboration and harmonization across the learning system. To rapidly expand the culture of collaboration and innovation, the Lab will be open and accessible to a mix of innovative thinkers and doers from across the ecosystem.

Independent and Agile

The Lab will be independent of the structures and cultures of the current learning system. The goal will be to identify, test, and scale initiatives rapidly across the system.

Experimentation

The Lab will be mandated to challenge the status quo. To do so, it will embed and reward innovation and experimentation.

Scaling Innovations

Calgary's current learning system embeds innovators from early childhood education to postsecondary and beyond. The Lab will be challenged to identify these innovations and design paths to scale.

Professional Development

Embedding flexible secondments from employers, educators, skills developers, policymakers, and researchers will instill a culture of continuous learning at the Lab. However, the real impact will be when seconded employees take their learning back to their home organization.

Work-Integrated Learning Pilot

In July 2022, the Government of Alberta and the Future Skills Centre announced \$5.4 million in funding for a three-year work-integrated learning (WIL) pilot program in Calgary. The program aims to increase the volume and variety of WIL opportunities (such as cooperative education, internships, applied research projects, field placements, and more) delivered collaboratively between postsecondary institutions and the business community.

This is an example of an ecosystem level project that has been catalyzed through the community but could see similar pilots being resourced through the Talent Lab model.

57,993

Total number of businesses in Calgary

95%

The percentage of total businesses with fewer than 50 employees

65%

The percentage of total businesses with fewer than five employees

2nd

Calgary's ranking of small businesses per capita in Canada



Lab Mandate

The *Calgary Talent Lab* will complement and augment Calgary's learning system by focusing on three goals: **harmonize, collaborate, and innovate**. To operationalize its mandate, the *Calgary Talent Lab* will be guided by priority questions from the drivers of *Calgary's Skills Development Framework*.

Developing Adaptive People, Organizations, and Systems



1. What mechanism will facilitate increased system agility to meet changing skills demands?
2. How can we facilitate increased system-level collaboration?
3. How can we scale skills development innovations?

Empowering Learners



1. How can we empower Calgarians to explore diverse career and skills development pathways?
2. How can we develop greater awareness of the diverse career pathways available?

Accessible and Inclusive Labour Market



1. How can we overcome the systemically biased hiring practices constraining our labour market potential?
2. How can we introduce employment practices that prioritize evidence and skills?

Open and Competitive Learning System



1. How can we efficiently integrate the diverse forms of non-certified and informal skills development into a holistic learning system, where employers recognize and value different learning pathways?
2. How can we design seamless pathways between certified, non-certified, and informal skills development?
3. How can we increase interdisciplinary skills development to drive increased career adaptability?

Management and Governance

The *Calgary Talent Lab* will be an independent non-profit entity. As part of its introduction, we propose a 12-month proof-of-concept phase to develop and refine the Lab mandate. During this phase, the Lab will be independent but administratively hosted by an existing civic or community partner (following the Skunk Works principles). A *Governance Board* will be established consisting of employers, skills developers, policymakers, researchers, and learners. This Board will define system-level priorities and allocate resources accordingly. Additionally, the Board will play a critical role in securing sustainable funding if there's a decision to proceed beyond the proof-of-concept.

During this proof-of-concept phase, the Lab will identify and deliver "quick-win" opportunities to demonstrate the potential of the Lab model. *Calgary Economic Development* will support the establishment of the Lab during the proof-of-concept phase, and the Board will define project priorities and funding. This phase includes the evaluation of the financial sustainability of the Lab, including pursuing incremental funding or alternative revenue streams to maintain Lab operations, and a recommendation on the potential structure of the Lab going forward. The Board will decide on proceeding beyond the proof-of-concept phase.

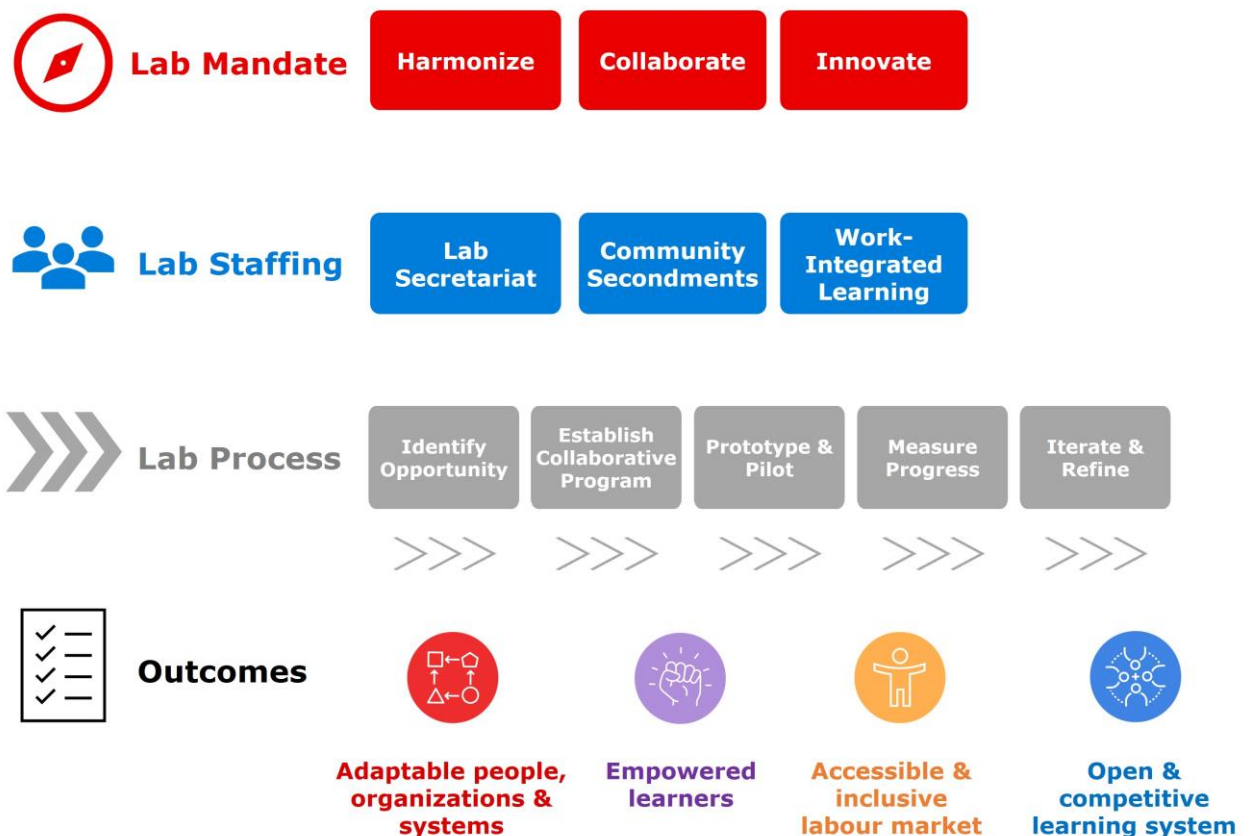


Fig. 1 - The Calgary Talent Lab

The Path Forward

Calgary's learning system develops exceptional, creative, and adaptable talent ready to thrive in a fast-changing world.

The *LearningCITY* initiative to date has primarily been a collaboration among a small group of community partners who share a vision of transforming Calgary's learning and skills development system to meet emerging labour market demands. However, this system-level challenge demands a system-level solution.

We recognize that to have an adaptive city with adaptive individuals, we also need a well-equipped learning system to deal with the fast-changing demands of the world. To this end, this is an open invitation to employers, skills developers, policymakers, researchers, and learners to accelerate collaboration and commit to establishing the *Calgary Talent Lab*, piloting new concepts and innovating the future together.

To help transform Calgary into a *LearningCITY* visit LearningCITY.ca

