

## Future-Proofing

***How does NPower Canada ensure its programs are demand-driven and adaptable to the changing needs of industry?***

### Introduction

NPower Canada is a sector-based, demand-driven workforce development initiative that launches low-income, underserved young adults ages 18-29 into sustainable digital careers.

Taking an employer-driven, nimble, and streamlined approach to employment, NPower Canada focuses exclusively on the tech sector, working directly with employers in the IT industry to identify and equip youth with relevant, in-demand tech skills. In doing so, the organization works to address two pertinent, paradoxical challenges – the many unemployed Canadians unable to access skilled employment and the employers who face a chronic shortage of qualified workers to meet their hiring needs.

### Canada's Digital Revolution

Canada's tech sector is a booming, high-potential industry with growing jobs and viable career pathways for youth.

During 2011-2016, Canada's digital economy experienced a steady labour growth of approximately 2.38% compared to that of 1.17% for the rest of the economy<sup>1</sup>. Now, the digital labour force amounts to nearly 1.4 million professionals, reflecting the viability in this economy and its expanding range of occupations<sup>2</sup>.

Sustaining the growth of rapid technological innovation and digitalization requires heavy investment into human capital, ensuring the next generation of workers have the right skills to maintain the momentum. In the ICTC's Labour Market Outlook 2017-2021 report, industry experts forecast an acute digital talent demand of approximately 216,000 positions in 2021 across all major industries. Yet currently, many Canadian businesses are experiencing significant issues in staffing critical positions; thus, meeting hiring demands will be an important priority for the foreseeable future.

In Alberta specifically, employment in the province's IT sector is projected to grow by at least 15% from 2017 to 2021; however, a looming skills shortage is also anticipated. An aging IT workforce, with nearly 13% of the demographic nearing retirement (ages 55

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. *Annual Review of the Labour Market, 2016*. (Ottawa: StatCan, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC), *The Next Talent Wave: Navigating the Digital Shift - Outlook 2021* (Ottawa: ICTC, 2017), 8.

65), and only 4.4% comprised of youth (ages 15-24), investing in youth to cultivate the next generation of tech talent is critical<sup>3</sup>.

Vulnerable youth groups, particularly those from low-income, racialized, Indigenous and newcomer communities, are largely underrepresented in the tech industry and, therefore, are at a higher risk of getting left behind by the digital revolution. Often precariously employed in low-wage retail and general labour occupations that are being displaced by rapid technological change, these youth lack access to professional networks and social capital, as well as the pertinent skills employers seek.

For Canada to take advantage of its rapidly growing tech sector and bridge supply with demand, cultivating the next generation of tech talent has become increasingly urgent. As mentioned, there is a clear and costly disconnect between the sector's high demand for talent and underutilized human capital, largely comprised of marginalized, underrepresented populations. Skills matching and upskilling have long been neglected but is critical in ensuring economic prosperity and social inclusion going forward.

## **The NPower Canada Model: Partnering with Industry**

Since launching in 2015, NPower Canada has scaled from one to five locations, four across the GTA and one in Calgary and has seen 80% of its 1,996 alumni find meaningful, IT-related work or pursue higher education within twelve months of graduation. Key to its success is its employer-centered approach, critical in achieving strong employment and retention outcomes.

In contrast to the prevalent job search-focused programming offered by government-funded Canadian employment service providers, NPower Canada offers a unique, sector-based workforce development approach.

For NPower Canada to continue ensuring barriered Canadian youth are equipped with relevant tech skills, it must remain demand-driven and continuously assess which jobs are currently vulnerable to labour market disruptions versus which are in-demand, yet in short supply. As the digital economy continues to transform, industry needs will change, fueled by contextual factors such as shifts in workforce and population demographics, economic and political landscapes, as well as new innovations in business and tech.

To remain apprised of, and responsive to industry trends and shifting hiring needs, NPower Canada routinely conducts and refreshes its labour market analysis. It leverages its network of employer partners, comprised of over 200 companies across

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<sup>3</sup> Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC), *The Next Talent Wave: Navigating the Digital Shift - Outlook 2021* (Ottawa: ICTC, 2017), 17.

Canada to understand industry needs and changing demands in the market and from there, determines how best to meet these changing demands.

Employers are intimately involved in every stage of program design, delivery, and evaluation, providing input into curriculum development, assisting with applicant screening and selection, recruiting talent from the program, and offering mentorship and networking opportunities to graduates. NPower Canada's top employers are also engaged as Board members and Industry Council representatives.

### *NPower Canada's Industry Council*

NPower Canada is led by a highly engaged and committed Board of Directors with diverse professional expertise in the private, not-for-profit and educational sectors. Several Board members represent founding corporate partners of NPower Canada such as Accenture, CIBC, Cisco and RBC who are also engaged in NPower Canada's Industry Council.

The goal of NPower Canada's Industry Council is to identify national employer needs and secure meaningful employment for its program participants. Industry Council members often facilitate warm referrals for NPower Canada to other companies in their networks based on their own positive experiences as Council members in hiring its youth participants.

While NPower Canada also employs other business development techniques to connect with new employers, including prospecting hiring opportunities on LinkedIn, cold calling, and attending virtual networking events and job fairs, its most effective method for engaging new employer partners is through its Industry Council.

Industry Council member organizations also play a critical role in advising on NPower's program curriculums to ensure alignment with their hiring needs. In collaborating with top employers, NPower Canada gains critical labour market intelligence to develop and deliver innovative, demand-driven training to prime youth with the exact skills needed for jobs that have high demand but low supply. Mutually beneficial for Industry Council member organizations, they're supplied with a talent pipeline of skilled, workplace-ready candidates.

Accenture, a founding partner of NPower Canada with representation on both its Board and Industry Council is also one of its top employers. To date, the company has hired 82 NPower Canada graduates for a wide range of junior roles including Business Analyst, Software Test Engineer, and Data Analyst. 89% of these hires remain with the firm today.

***"NPower Canada has offered Accenture an alternative source of talent. Their graduates demonstrate humility and prove that giving non-traditional candidates a chance can lead to great employees. If we want to attract the best, then we should be pulling people from everywhere." - Senior Manager, Accenture***

## *Employer Consultations*

In addition to its bi-monthly Industry Council meetings, NPower Canada ensures it conducts individual consultations with its employer partners to better understand their changing needs, an essential way to ensure industry insights are thoroughly integrated into curriculum design. These consultations with leading firms including Accenture, RBC and Calgary's Long View Systems have informed NPower Canada's continuous program adaptation, piloting new curriculum in software development, quality assurance, testing and other in-demand skill sets in response to evolving industry need.

## *Employer-Informed Evaluation*

Along with supporting program design and delivery, employers are also actively engaged in evaluation. To ensure its holistic training program has a measurable benefit, NPower Canada program staff regularly connect with supervisors of alumni employed with hiring partners to obtain feedback on graduates' job performance, professionalism, learning agility and other key success indicators. NPower Canada also asks employers about their interest in continuing to hire from NPower Canada and their propensity to recommend NPower Canada to other firms in their networks. If employer partners are willing to refer NPower Canada's services, NPower Canada staff then follow up with these newly referred companies. This broadens NPower Canada's potential referral base beyond the executives who sit on its Industry Council to include a broader range of hiring managers and talent acquisition professionals with a larger number of employers who have helped to significantly grow and diversify its employer referrals.

To date, according to cumulative survey data obtained since 2015:

- 92% of participants have been evaluated by employers as meeting or exceeding performance expectations
- 96% of employers surveyed have expressed interest in recruiting future talent from the program
- 98% of employers have expressed willingness to recommend NPower Canada as a talent solution to other employers.

Employers, via the evaluation survey are also able to summarize their personal experience recruiting and hiring NPower Canada youth to their organization:

***“NPower Canada gives their participants practical, critical thinking and problem-solving tools that most entry level positions require. We know that people who have been through [the program] are interested in tech and have a solid knowledge base. Their onboarding time was 10 per cent less than normal.” - Executive Director, CyberEquality (o/a Free Geek Toronto)***

***“We were searching for a new hire for several weeks but shortly after we started interviewing NPower Canada participants we knew we found the perfect candidates. As new employees they get up to speed quickly. We knew we had the perfect employee within 50 per cent of the usual 3 month probation.” - IT Operations Manager, E-Tech Computing***

The NPower Canada Industry Council, along with individual employers, also provide useful constructive feedback regarding concerns or gaps they have noted in the performance and readiness of NPower Canada graduates. For example, in multiple Council meetings convened in late 2019 and early 2020, some hiring partners expressed concerns about the perceived lack of initiative displayed by some youth to volunteer for additional duties or projects, or to propose ideas in meetings.

These Industry Council members largely concluded that these youth may have felt nervous to contribute their thoughts in team meetings as the newest staff member or may have been afraid of rejection when considering volunteering for a new assignment. However, these same employers cautioned that low self-confidence or shyness could be misconstrued by colleagues as indifference or lack of engagement and could negatively impact perceptions of these youth among their peers and supervisors.

NPower Canada responded to this feedback by integrating a stronger focus on team projects, public speaking and assertive communication into the soft skills training that accounts for at least 30% of the program, and which most employers surveyed still consider just as, if not more, important than the technical skills training. During the most recent Industry Council meetings, some employers have noted a visibly positive difference in the self-confidence and initiative-taking behaviour of their most recent NPower Canada hires.

The depth of employer engagement throughout the program ultimately generates a strong and continuously growing pipeline of job placements for underserved youth. By demonstrating its willingness to receive constructive feedback, and its agility in effectively implementing these suggestions for improvement, NPower Canada has built trust with employers in the program’s ability to adapt its technical training to changing market demand and its employability and soft skills training to workplace norms and expectations. This credibility gained with employers, earned incrementally over time, has proven critical to securing job placements for NPower Canada graduates with some of Canada’s leading companies.

## Using Data to Drive Growth

NPower Canada also relies heavily on data when making decisions on both when and how to incorporate improvements to its design, and what regions to scale its program to. It leverages recent research and relevant evidence-based reports on youth unemployment and industry trends from Statistics Canada, Calgary Economic Development, the Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC), and other diverse sources of labour market intelligence with a regional or industry perspective.

NPower Canada's strategic expansion throughout the GTA and into Calgary is driven by analyzing data to ensure successful implementation in new regions. One innovative tool NPower Canada heavily relies on to analyze the viability of new markets for expansion is a methodology developed by one of its founding partners, Accenture, called WANTED Analytics. This is a cloud-based global data science tool that scans corporate career sites and job banks to obtain granular, real-time information on the employers, hiring cycles and volume of jobs available for specific occupations in a given market. NPower Canada uses the tool to determine the types of tech jobs available and the volume and frequency of entry-level IT hiring.

Using the WANTED Analytics tool to conduct a rigorous labour market analysis, in combination with extensive consultations with regional employers, funders and community partners, NPower Canada successfully identified and launched a training site in Calgary, Alberta, a region with both growing demand for junior-level digital talent coupled with high youth unemployment indicating an untapped pool of young talent that can be upskilled for the tech roles that industry needs to fill.

NPower Canada is now prepared to continue its expansion nationally after its successful launch in Calgary, establishing a presence in Halifax and Vancouver in 2021.

## Covid-19 –Shifting Hiring Needs and NPower Canada's Response

The nature of work and business operations have changed rapidly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020. Given the escalation of the pandemic and its profound implications for the future of work, it has become more urgent than ever to equip vulnerable young adults with the marketable, in-demand tech skills required to secure sustainable employment, both during the current crisis and once the economy begins to recover.

As COVID-19 triggered an unprecedented, immediate shift to remote work, it required employers across geographies and sectors to leverage virtual technical support, remote customer service and cloud solutions to sustain operations. This has also involved bringing customer care roles back from outsourced global contractors, many of whom have suspended operations due to lack of safe remote work capacity, to the "virtual

onshore,” hiring Canadian employees with the skills and ability to work from home as customer care and technical support professionals. As millions of firms have also been forced to migrate fully to the cloud, many businesses also require support with configuring cloud solutions and training their employees on these platforms.

Along with upskilling specifically for cloud, technical support, customer care or other in-demand roles, Canadian workers must learn how to work remotely which entails gaining the digital literacy required to work effectively in the cloud, independently managing time and tasks, working with minimal supervision and communicating online in a clear and professional manner.

The ability to work virtually is now the new essential skill. NPower Canada’s employer partners have advised that the pandemic will likely have longer-term implications for the nature of work, with many operations and services continuing online post-pandemic. This means that far greater numbers of workers will be expected to perform some or all of their duties remotely going forward. At an online meeting of its Industry Council on March 16, 2020, employers unanimously urged NPower Canada to prepare its current and future program participants for this new reality, recommending pivots in curriculum and training described in greater detail below.

Without access to upskilling for in-demand technical roles or gaining the employability and essential skills required for remote work, low-income young adults who already face barriers to employment are at significant risk of falling further behind in the digital and cloud revolution. The impact of this could be profound, with hundreds of thousands of Canadian youth trapped in long-term unemployment and unable to emerge from poverty.

As an IT-focused workforce development program that has consistently placed more than 80% of its young, low-income graduates into meaningful tech careers, NPower Canada remains well-positioned to equip vulnerable youth with the skills required to navigate the current crisis and secure jobs of the future. The program has already begun adapting its current training to include a greater emphasis on the essential skills required for virtual work while continuing to upskill youth for in-demand technical support and cloud solutions-focused roles. For example, NPower Canada has begun delivering the Google IT Support Professional certification to youth enrolled in its virtual Calgary and GTA programs since May 2020, upskilling program participants in cloud computer and information security in addition to in-demand technical support skills.

## **Sharing Learnings and Amplifying Impact**

NPower Canada firmly believes its program model can be scaled and replicated to upskill and place exponentially greater numbers of unemployed and underemployed young adults, including those whose jobs have been eliminated by COVID-19, for IT roles that employers urgently need to fill.

NPower Canada is committed to sharing knowledge and best practices with other workforce development practitioners so both job seekers and employers can be better supported. NPower Canada regularly provides stakeholders including its Board of Directors, Industry Council, community partners, and funders with its evaluation findings and has also shared its best practices and lessons learned with government agencies, non-profit organizations, and training providers at forums such as the United Way Career Navigator Network, CivicAction Champions Council and Sector Skills Academy. NPower Canada will continue to seek out these knowledge-sharing opportunities including conferences, forums, community meetings, roundtables with employment services providers, and other appropriate venues to share insights and learn from other stakeholders who offer workplace training programs.

## Reflection Questions

1. What are your best practices for engaging employers in the continuous improvement of your program?
2. How does your organization plan and prepare for the future of work?
3. What resources do you rely on to forecast evolving hiring needs?