Opening Remarks

for

The Honourable Randy Boissonnault,

Minister of Employment, Workforce Development

and Official languages,

for

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Hello everyone.

First, I want to acknowledge we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Kanien’kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg.

It’s such a pleasure to be among you for this workforce summit. I thank all of you who made the trip to Montreal, and welcome to those joining us remotely.

Since 2015, the Government of Canada has worked hard to modernize our economy. We have:

* retooled our approach to building homes;
* retooled how we tackle infrastructure challenges;
* retooled our industrial strategy; and,
* retooled our approach to health care and social programs.

But, once again, labour dynamics across the world are changing. And it’s happening at a dizzying pace.

Now, some critical sectors face labour shortages.

Skills mismatches are growing in response to a “grey tsunami” of retirements. We have been too reliant on the international labour supply to address shortages, and youth are facing high unemployment levels.

The solution is to invest more in homegrown talent, and to ensure organizations are agile and responsive about meeting workers’ – and employers’ – evolving needs.

We need a modern inclusive and productive labour market capable of propelling the Canadian economy through the 21st century.

That means we need bold new action and system wide changes. Easier said than done, I know, because we’re using old tools for the new economy. There are great opportunities to leverage if we work together to get things done the right way.

Canadians are good at adapting. It wasn’t that long ago COVID taught us a new lesson.

How amazing was it that, during COVID, our workforce pivoted almost overnight. That experience taught us we can be versatile. It taught us we can face the need for change with confidence.

Today, we are facing a whole new set of challenges, and opportunities. But there’s no reason to expect this new phase of work will be smooth and obstacle-free. We have transitions to make, and no choice but to make them.

Canada has a generational opportunity to develop a new worker-centric, forward looking, and sustainable economy. I have invited all of you to this summit to help us get it right.

**Pause**

We need a national dialogue on what modern approaches for equipping the workforce of tomorrow actually looks like.

Canada is home to the smartest minds, the most talented workers, and a strong education, training, and employment system.

In all of you, I can’t imagine a better equipped, and more motivated, group of Canadians with the ability to lead us into the future.

There’s a lot to do. I know we won’t emerge with *all* the answers, but by pooling our diverse views and working together, we can better understand how to build a more innovative, productive, and competitive labour force.

**Pause**

I want to kick start today’s proceedings by telling you we’re building on a pretty good foundation.

* Canada had one of the fastest employment recoveries in the G7 following the pandemic.
* Canada had a rise of 1.1% in real GDP in 2023.
* Between 2019 and 2023, the participation rate for women with children under 6 years old increased to 79.7%. That’s 51,000 additional women joining the labour force.
* In 2021, 3.2 million persons with disabilities aged 15 to 64 were employed.
* The Conference Board of Canada tells us that generative AI has the potential to add almost 2% to Canada’s GDP.

But, there is still place for improvement.

Indigenous people have higher unemployment rates than non-Indigenous Canadians.

Over one million persons with disabilities are unemployed, despite having the potential for paid employment.

600,000 skilled trades workers are set to retire by 2031 and that means we’re losing skills that must be replaced.

Youth unemployment rates are up, and getting young workers interested in the skilled trades is proving a challenge. Only one in ten plan to pursue a trades career, and that isn’t enough.

Our job is to get out the message that a trades apprentice is on the road to a rewarding and in-demand career, and will likely never be out of work.

The workforce development system has not been modernized since the 1990s. What were traditional assumptions three decades ago are no longer today’s reality.

Fewer and fewer people have a career for life. Part-time work, gig work, and flexible work means workers transition careers more often.

Our two biggest tools – Employment Insurance and Labour Market Agreements – were designed to help unemployed workers after job loss.

That’s *instead* of proactively supporting workers in Canada to advance in their careers and meet employers’ needs.

~~Provinces and Territories do not work together because they fear losing workers to other jurisdictions. They under-invest in education and training, so colleges and universities are now struggling with costs.~~

~~And professional licensing bodies prefer shortages to keep wages high for their members.~~

~~These old systems and legacy policies aren’t meeting today’s needs. If we stay stuck in the past, we will get more of what we have now, but with worse results.~~

If Canada is to be a leader as the world builds a net-zero economy, our workers must have access to training, re-training, and upskilling.

The Royal Bank of Canada says that over the next 10 to 20 years, the demand for new skills linked to the shift to a low carbon economy could see up to 400,000 jobs added.

We’re committed to doing all we can to grow this new economy and are working flat out on skills training.

That’s why the Government of Canada regularly consults with its partners. We can’t anticipate every change in the workplace, but we want to be able to see change coming and meet it head on.

And that’s why we’re gathered here today.

**Pause**

To complement this summit, we released an online discussion paper offering a snapshot of Canada’s skills development landscape.

*Building a Modern 21st Century Workforce* outlines three priorities:

* + Ensuring better alignment between workforce strategies, training institutions, labour groups, employers, and economic priorities
  + Eliminating inefficiencies and barriers in Canadian labour markets
  + Maximizing labour productivity through strategic skills development and lifelong learning

We also need to take inspiration from other jurisdictions – like the European Union, which is exploring new concepts to help create decent employment.

One of those is the concept of the Job Guarantee. As its name suggests, it seeks to grant every person who wants a job.

Meaningful jobs are tailored to the individuals in the private sector through subsidized wages, or in the public sector. Participants have demonstrated decreased levels of stress and financial insecurity, and subjects felt encouraged to take on potential other jobs.

We can also take inspiration from the United States**,** which now has nine workforce training hubs serving to retool the US economy.

These Workforce Hubs will ensure every community can meet its foundational labor needs, and that every American has access to a good career without leaving their community.

There is a commitment to ensuring all workers—including women, people of color, veterans, and those that have been historically left behind–have equitable access to job opportunities and the training needed to fill them.

By fostering collaborations with partners such as labor unions, employers, and education and training providers, the Hubs have created pipelines to good jobs and are boosting job retention.

**Pause**

Here at home, we have the **Future Skills program**, which focuses on helping Canadians make informed choices about the skills they will need in the future.

The Future Skills Centre has developed more than 230 innovation and research projects, that have helped over 50,000 Canadians access skills training and/or employment.

The Centre has worked with more than 1,000 employers, in 20 sectors nationwide. It also includes a focus on underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.

And we have the **Sustainable Jobs Act**, to help guarantee that a net-zero emissions economy means significant opportunities for Canadians to secure good, well-paying sustainable jobs.

Projects like this are essential because we have been too reliant on international labour supply, to address our labour shortages.

We need to address real gaps and drive long term change by investing in homegrown talent.

We need to make sure salaries keep pace with the cost of living.

We need to prioritize language training for newcomers.

And we need to make a commitment to under-represented groups including young people, women, persons with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples so they have an equal opportunity to grow the workforce and help build stronger, more resilient communities.

**Pause**

In that vein, I would like to announce the new **Canada Retraining and Opportunities Initiative**.

The Initiative is part of the Government’s response to job losses impacting a community. Communities have their own distinct ways of coming together to support individuals during challenging times. And this is a program that puts communities at the heart of determining their economic futures.

This initiative will help bolster community resilience by helping displaced workers transition into new jobs. By supporting community-based approaches, we can harness local expertise, so people and communities can thrive in an evolving job market.

**Pause**

## There is no one-size-fits-all solution to fostering a modern, diverse, inclusive and productive 21st century labour market. But we’re here today to find a new way forward.

That new way forward requires bold action on youth employment, guaranteeing their place in the new economy. We need to gain the confidence of young people, so they know their employment needs and aspirations will be met.

We need employer-led solutions to drive training, upskilling and reskilling coupled with technology adoption. That includes pursuing an approach to Workforce Training Hubs, as targeted solutions to pressing sectoral and local training needs, that adapt as needs change, and that drive employer-led solutions aligned to industrial strategies.

That includes driving innovation, so we can address persistent issues in workforce development, including shortages in the trades.

We need tobuild an AI-driven Job-Bank of the Future, enabling real-time job searching and matching, training and skills assessments to upskill for tomorrow’s jobs.

We need to address structural barriers that keep Canadians from reaching their full potential. How many more workers could be in the workforce if there were an equal number of women and men working over the age of 55, or if the employment income of racialized individuals was not lower than non-racialized and non-Indigenous graduates?

We need to bring the Provinces and Territories to the table to find new ways to incentivize change in their jurisdictions.

We need new policies and programs that support thoughtful recruitment and integration of global talent.

And we need to massively scale-up our number of sustainable jobs, so we can adjust to the reality of megatrends, such as digitalization, our aging population, and decarbonization, which continue to shift the economy and our economic priorities.

And I haven’t forgotten about s**mall and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).** They employ 63.8% of the workforce, but **face** employee retention, staff turnover, and recruitment costs challenges – mostly alone. Helping them is a priority.

That’s quite the laundry-list of things for us to talk about in one day, but that’s the agenda.

**Closing**

I may have a long title, but I like to refer to myself as the Minister of Jobs. And I’ll say that Canada’s long-term economic success depends on workers having the right skills.

If we make the necessary changes, I happen to believe our future is packed with good news and great opportunity.

Canada is uniquely positioned to seize the moment. **Our economy is healthy,** and our country **is recognized as a good place to invest and grow.**

And if our workforce is fully prepared, seize the moment we will.

So enough from me. It’s time to get to work.

Thank you for taking the time to be part of this summit.

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