

Introducing Upskill Canada

A new, pan-Canadian
talent platform



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Introduction

In October 2022, Palette Skills published a white paper articulating our theory of change on how to build a more productive, inclusive and prosperous economy through upskilling. Titled [“Upskilling Canada: How to unlock our highly skilled workforce to build a more inclusive economy”](#), it focused on the contradictions present in the Canadian labour market; namely, that despite having one of the most highly skilled workforces in the world, Canadian employers are continually plagued by a lack of qualified talent. It argued that the root causes of this challenge are a combination of lack of access to talent and an unwillingness to take perceived risks when hiring qualified talent from different sectors.

We articulated our vision for an ecosystem-level approach that would leverage a broader national network of organizations that includes post-secondary institutes, employment and community services, industry associations, and other enabling partners. We envisioned that this ecosystem, or systems-wide approach, would be connected through a shared focus on designing and delivering demand-driven upskilling programs. This approach would place employers at the centre of the process and result in higher levels of job placement for workers in new high-growth careers.

As the successful applicant to Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada’s *Upskilling for Industry Initiative* fund, we are now in a position to bring this vision to life. The UII commits \$250M over three years to upskill 15,000 Canadians into new careers, and we are eager to deliver on this commitment.

The purpose of this second white paper is to lay out our plan for building a new national talent platform to accomplish this mandate. The paper will demonstrate why Palette Skills is the right organization to lead this work, and describe how this platform will help workers navigate new employment opportunities emerging in high-growth sectors while ensuring fast growing companies can access the talent they need, when they need it. And it will demonstrate how we intend to connect the ecosystem through this platform, so that organizations with strengths to contribute to solving this problem each have a role to play in building the solution.

**We are calling this
new talent platform
“Upskill Canada”.**

About Palette Skills

Palette Skills is a national nonprofit whose purpose is to help Canada's most innovative companies access untapped talent by creating a rapid upskilling system that connects new talent pipelines to high-demand roles.

Palette Skills was incubated at the Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship and incorporated in 2017. Our initial motivation was to ensure that, as automation and technology radically changed the labour market, this disruption didn't destabilize peoples' livelihoods. We saw instead an opportunity to create pathways that would allow people to benefit from economic change. We knew that a key requirement would be the ability for people to transition careers quickly as demand shifted across the economy and that the primacy of employers in that process would be foundational to success.

We are now proudly hosted at the University of Toronto, and our vision continues to be of an inclusive and equitable economy where people and businesses can achieve their full potential.



The missing piece of the puzzle

The Canadian education and training landscape is filled with organizations and institutes well-positioned to build programs that connect employers to the talent they need. Found in each region of the country, these organizations have tremendous training capacity, subject-matter expertise, and ability to systematically scale new talent solutions for employers. The challenge for many is that this kind of employer-led approach is not their core competency, and that few can build new capacity for this type of work on their own.



Likewise, there are employers across the country which recognize that they need to be involved in building talent programs if they want to ensure they have access to the talent they need to grow their organizations. However, many don't know where to start, nor do they have the time or capacity to navigate different programs and approaches.

It was clear to us that what the Canadian ecosystem was missing was a single organization whose primary purpose was to:

- establish an effective employer-led upskilling model focused on job placement;
- connect the ecosystem of stakeholders; and,
- scale this new approach in a way that makes engagement easy for all partners and beneficiaries.

**We launched
Palette Skills to be
that organization –
the missing piece of
the puzzle.**

Introducing Upskill Canada

Canada boasts one of the most highly skilled workforces in the world. However, we are underutilizing the skills of many of these workers and leaving potential behind. This creates a double-sided drag on productivity – companies aren't tapping into the skills they need to grow their businesses, and Canadians aren't unlocking their full economic and human potential.

Automation, artificial intelligence, and the shift to a net-zero economy are causing structural changes to the labour market. Moreover, tightening demographics and increasing demands are heightening an already highly competitive battle to attract skilled workers. Other countries are facing similar challenges, and the ability for Canadian industry to compete and win in the global race for talent will hinge on whether they can secure the workers they need when they need them.

Palette Skills is launching Upskill Canada to help our country make the most of our competitive advantages while building a more inclusive economy in the process. Upskill Canada will connect an ecosystem of employers and training providers across the country to collaborate in new ways and help transition mid-career workers into new careers in high-demand roles.



It will center employers in the program design process and result in new talent pipelines that help address the need for workers across key high-growth sectors, providing a competitive advantage for Canadian industry.

Purpose + objectives

Upskill Canada will target all regions of the country and support Canadian-based employers, with a particular focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It will focus on strengthening key growth sectors, including digital technology, cyber security, agricultural technology, advanced manufacturing, clean technology and biomanufacturing. Its primary objectives are to:

- Support employers located across the country, particularly SMEs in high-growth sectors, to better address their skills needs.
- Upskill mid-career Canadians, including those from underrepresented groups, and help them connect with new work opportunities in high-growth sectors.
- Drive lasting improvements to the upskilling ecosystem by building close collaborations across training providers, employers, and other partners to design and deliver upskilling programs and shift mindsets around talent development and utilization.



Key activities

In determining the range of activities Upskill Canada will focus on, we considered some of the opportunities we saw in the market and the role a central organization could play in addressing them. Some of these opportunities include:

- Leveraging an investment strategy to guide program funding built on real-time labour market insights that identifies key talent gaps in each sector to prioritize for funding and impact evaluation.
- Ensuring program quality for employers by using a common approach to program design to provide a level of consistency and quality assurance.
- Building mechanisms to support the capacity development of partners to deliver on this common approach, while continuously testing, evaluating and identifying new best practices.
- Creating an interconnected ecosystem, where the strengths of each partner add up to a sum greater than each part.

The following activities represent the starting point for Upskill Canada. As the system grows and evolves, we will continually look for new ways to add value back into the ecosystem through our work.



Investment strategy centered on market demand



Upskill Canada will leverage an investment strategy that identifies high-demand job clusters in each sector and prioritizes them for funding. This investment strategy will ensure that we are targeting the biggest job gaps in the market that can be addressed through upskilling.

Program delivery partners will still be required to demonstrate job demand, validated by employer partners, to receive program funding through Upskill Canada. The purpose of this investment strategy will be to provide a baseline through which we can generate an economic impact analysis, ensuring we are delivering high-impact results for industry partners.

We will refresh this research regularly with the goal of developing a system that can continuously capture labour market signals from employers, particularly SMEs, helping delivery partners respond to demand as it arises. This system will eventually provide a forward-looking view of looming talent needs, allowing us to respond more quickly as demand for certain roles shifts.

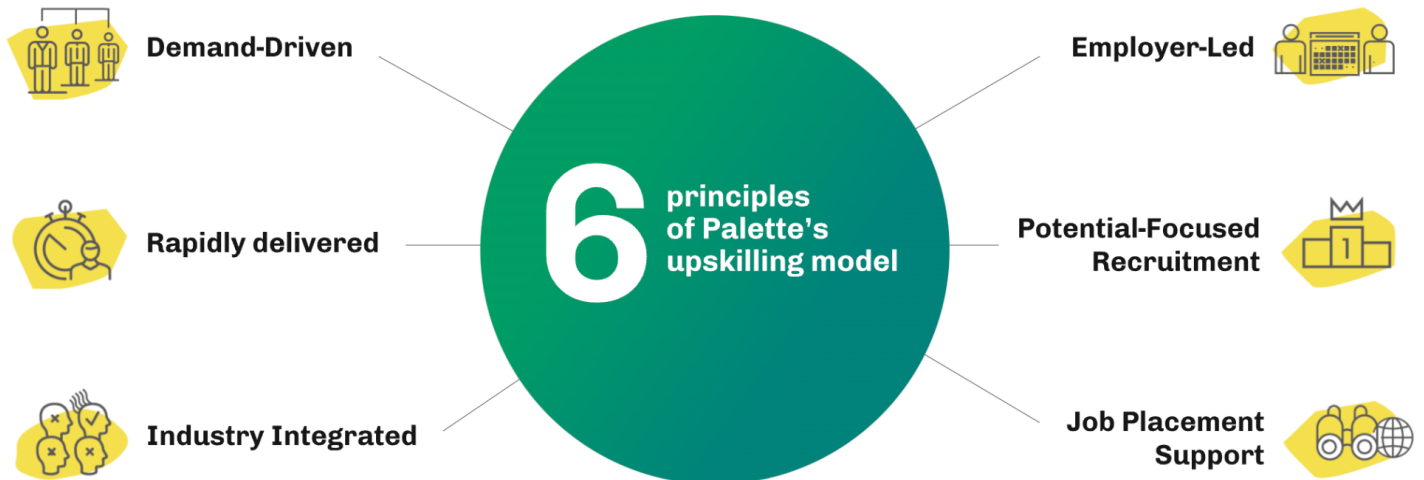
A shared approach to program design

At Palette Skills, we define upskilling as any program that deploys skills development to help someone move into a new job. The difference between training and upskilling is in the outcomes that participants seek to achieve.

Training is about teaching someone new skills to help them gain new knowledge. A trainee may leverage those new skills to move into a new job, but the desired outcome is that the trainee has learned something new. On the other hand, success in upskilling is job placement. While learning new skills is a core part of upskilling, so is gaining the professional

acumen needed to succeed in a new industry and to successfully navigate the job search and interview process to land a new role. At Palette Skills, we have identified six core components required for a successful upskilling program, which we call the Palette Model for Upskilling.

This model will create the common standard that all program proposals supported through Upskill Canada will be required to address effectively to secure funding. We view these components as “principles, not prescriptions”. There are a range of approaches partners can use to address each of these components.



The 6 principles of Palette’s upskilling model

Demand-Driven	Demand for the target job is validated by local employers who are hiring.
Rapid Delivery	Programs are launched within 6 months, and delivered in up to 16 weeks.
Employer-Led	Programs are collaboratively codesigned with employers, with employers defining the learning requirements for the program. Partnerships with employers are formed before program design begins.
Experiential and Industry-Integrated	Industry representatives are directly involved in program activities, either through guest lectures, panel discussions, networking events, or other activities.
Potential-Focused Recruitment	Admissions criteria are designed to evaluate a person’s transferable skills gained throughout their life and potential to succeed in the field, and not their previous accomplishments.
Job Placement Support	Job placement support activities are integrated throughout the program, such as structured job readiness programming, individual or group coaching, additional employer networking opportunities, etc.

If you would like to learn more about the Palette Model for Upskilling and our broader theory of change, take a look at our white paper, [Upskilling Canada: How to unlock our highly-skilled workforce to build a more inclusive economy](#).

The Learning Sandbox

We know some prospective delivery partners will be more experienced with the different components of our upskilling model than others. For some organizations, a model like this will feel familiar, but for others, thinking like this might be entirely new. The Learning Sandbox will be a service provided by Upskill Canada to delivery partners to help them develop capacity to build programs that align with the Palette upskilling model.

Through the Sandbox, the insights and best practices of program design that we have developed will be converted into workshops, webinars, tools, and other opportunities to support delivery partners.

We will also work with delivery partners to capture case studies and best practices. The Learning Sandbox will amplify this work, serving as an outlet for new insights, evaluation and continuous innovation.



Creating a living lab

At Palette Skills, we have developed our expertise in upskilling through practice. Designing and delivering upskilling programs has grounded us in understanding what it takes – and how challenging it can be – to succeed.

As we grow, we will not lose sight of this work and will continue to have mechanisms internally to test and improve best practices in program delivery.



Through Upskill Canada, Palette will continue to deliver and expand our existing and highly successful programs: SalesCamp and Automation + Digital Agriculture. We are capping the total percent of delivery funding available to Palette programs and holding both programs to the same financial requirements, reporting, and outcomes as our external delivery partners.

Additionally, we have restructured our internal operations so that our programs team is built like a separate delivery unit, similar to how external delivery partners would operate. We did this to create a living lab through our programs, where new best practices, tools, or platforms could be piloted and validated before they are scaled across the ecosystem through the Learning Sandbox.

A connected, national ecosystem

Connecting employers to robust pipelines of qualified talent is the primary purpose of Upskill Canada. To do this, we must also connect the broadest possible network, including industry associations, economic development agencies, chambers of commerce, workforce planning boards, employment services, newcomer agencies, as well as training and post-secondary institutes.

The value of a connected ecosystem will be felt by jobseekers who have an easier time finding program opportunities, by employers who know where to go to tap into needed talent, and by organizations, who will be able to connect with a network of like-minded organizations looking for opportunities to collaborate and drive impact.

Through Upskill Canada, we will operate a network partnerships team, working across each region of the country to connect this ecosystem. This team will provide business development for Upskill Canada broadly, ensuring that this network of partners has easy ways to find and connect with the programs launched through the platform, as well as to refer jobseekers and employers to opportunities. This will augment, but not replace, the partnership development work done by delivery partners to support their specific programs.



Joining the platform

Upskill Canada is industry-driven, which means it needs to operate in a responsive and nimble manner that moves at the speed of business. As a service platform, it needs to create streamlined ways for all potential partners - not just delivery partners - to connect into the system and gain benefit. To accomplish this, we've developed a partner registration and funding application process designed to continuously capture engagement interest from diverse organizations, to fast-track well-developed project proposals, and to advance talent solutions based on employer demand.

Registration system

The first step in the process is registration. All potential partner organizations, including prospective delivery partners, industry associations, employers, community agencies, employment services, and others will be asked to register their interest in working with Upskill Canada through the portal. This will help us to quickly identify overall capacity across the ecosystem as well as to identify potential areas for connection, alignment, and collaboration. Registration will remain open and ongoing.

A potential partner organization will be asked questions during the registration process that will help us stream them into different channels. Prospective delivery partners will be put in an application channel and a stream depending on the stage of development and the degree of employer validation that has taken place thus far. Network partners and employers will be segmented based on their interest and organization type, and connected to our network partnerships team for further engagement.



Funding streams

The second step in the process for prospective delivery partners is the application. Delivery partners will be placed in an application stream based on the level of employer-commitment already established and the time required before launch, once funded.

Partners that meet the requirements of the Launch stream will be invited to submit a full application. Partners placed in the Validate or Develop streams will be connected to additional support and resources through the Learning Sandbox to help their programs become Launch-ready. We will aim to open the application portal to launch-ready applications every eight weeks, creating a semi-rolling intake process. This will ensure that the system is responsive and nimble to changing and emerging job demands.

Launch	Applicant has employers already committed to co-design and delivery and is ready to begin upskilling individuals within 3 months or less.
Validate	Applicant has identified employers and is planning to engage them; is ready to begin upskilling individuals within 3–6 months.
Develop	Applicant has identified a job role in demand, but has not yet started employer engagement and/or program scoping.

Program access portal

Once programs are launched, Upskill Canada will operate a program access portal to provide a central location to find and connect with program opportunities. This portal will make it easy for participants and employers to locate programs relevant to them. It will also provide an easy way for network partners to refer participants and employers to opportunities across the platform.

Over time, we will look at additional ways we can build and expand this portal to provide other support to partners and participants as we identify new needs and opportunities. It is important to note, too, that this portal will link to program pages managed by delivery partners. It will not be the sole access point for programs; partners will be expected to manage their own application and recruitment systems and will be accountable for participant and employer recruitment into their programs.

Envisioning a more secure future

It is essential that our talent advantage be unlocked to ensure that Canadian industry can compete and win in the global economy. An uncertain future requires us to strike a balance between disruptive economic innovation and personal economic stability.

A resilient society depends on ordinary Canadians benefiting from the economic gains brought by the changing economy; we fail when they feel left on the outside, looking in. Through Upskill Canada, we envision a future where all people and businesses can reach their full potential. Visit our website at www.upskillcanada.org to find out how you can get involved.



Our Partners

Thank you to our partners and supporters. We are excited to be building Upskill Canada with you.

Funding Partner



National Host Institution



Supporters

Thank you to our partners who supported us in our proposal for Upskill Canada.

Algonquin College
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Biotalent Canada
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CAE
Canadian Alliance for Skills and Training
in Life Sciences
Canadian Green Building Council
Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters
CICan
Contact North
Council of Canadian Innovators
D2L
Dalhousie University
Economic Development Regina
First Work

Fit First
FutureFit AI
Halifax Partnerships
Humber College
Innovate BC
Lighthouse Labs
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