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## Employer Discovery Guide

Ensuring that your program is demand-driven and employer-led are the first two components of the Palette Skills Model for upskilling. **Demand-driven** means that program areas are selected based on **validated demand from local employers**. **Employer-led programs** are **collaboratively co-designed** with employers, who define the learning requirements for the program. Thus, partnerships with employers are formed before program design begins.

### Why We Start With Employers

Securing a job is the intended outcome of upskilling programs, so we measure the success of these programs through job placement. The easiest way to ensure that you are designing a program that will result in employment for participants is to start with the employers; by asking employers for insights on how they determine their hires, you can ensure that your program ends with the desired results right off the bat.

The purpose of engaging with employers is to gather the necessary design considerations to incorporate into your program outcomes. It will also help you validate that there is enough demand for the role to justify the need for a program. These requirements and considerations can include things like:

- The employer's operating environment to understand how they view and manage risk
- The talent challenges they are facing that's keeping them up at night
- How they have already tried, or are currently trying, to solve this challenge, what's working, what isn't and why
- The standards and indicators employers use to evaluate candidates and their interview and hiring processes

Following employer discovery, you should have an understanding of:

- Current hiring needs, as well as future hiring needs for the target job titles/cluster in the target regions
- Plans for growth and how that will impact these hiring needs
- Challenges regarding talent acquisition and the cause for these challenges
- How these challenges are currently being addressed
- Effectiveness of current hiring and recruitment processes
- Defining success for talent acquisition

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## Guide Outline

This guide provides you with tips and best practices for:

1. Identifying employers in your target region and sector.
2. Interview logistics: Reaching out to employers and scheduling interviews.
3. Conducting discovery interviews with employers.
4. Sample initial questions for employers.

### 1. Identifying employers in your target region and sector

The first step in employer discovery is to locate employers to speak with. Here are some different methods that can help identify employers in your program's target region and sector:

- Research publications or news articles can help identify sizable employers who may be looking for talent.
- Cross-checking with job boards, and/or federal and provincial resources to identify if posted jobs align with your program proposal.
  - Examples can include: [indeed.ca](https://www.indeed.ca), [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com), [Agcareers.com](https://www.agcareers.com), [Canadian Cybersecurity Jobs](https://www.canadiancybersecurityjobs.com).
- Reaching out through industry associations, chambers of commerce etc.
  - Example: [Ottawa Board of Trade](https://ottawaboardoftrade.com), [Canadian Agriculture Human Resources Council](https://www.canadianagriculturehumanresourcescouncil.com)
- Connecting with your network. Colleagues, friends, family, and connections might know someone who would be interested in participating.
- 'Snowball sampling' – once you chat with one employer, they may be able to recommend other employers you should speak with.

Once you have identified the employers, you will need to decide who in the organization would be best to speak with. Some points to consider:

- During the initial scoping phase, the senior leadership and HR team may be key for validating current and future demand.
- During later consultations, individuals managing or overseeing the roles being hired for may be a better fit to assist with program design.

Company websites or LinkedIn can help you pinpoint the role or individual best suited for this conversation.

## 2. Interview logistics: Reaching out to employers and scheduling interviews

Now that you know who you want to speak with, the next step is to reach out to the employer and set up a conversation. Here are some practices we have used in the past when connecting with employers:

- Ask an industry association or a warm lead to make an introduction to the employer.
- Be clear about why you are reaching out. For example, share that you are in the early stages of developing a new upskilling program in the region in which the employer operates. Express that you would like to better understand the needs of employers hiring in this industry/region to better scope the program.
- Confirm your assumption that this employer would be a good fit for the discovery interview by confirming their level of demand over email. Once you have a sense that they may be a good fit, suggest setting up a conversation.
- If you are reaching out to multiple employers, tools like <https://calendly.com/> may be helpful for scheduling to ensure you don't get double booked.

A common challenge in conducting employer discovery calls is finding a time that works. Some approaches we have taken to support employer participation are:

- Conducting the meeting in a way that is most convenient for the employer. This could be in-person, over the phone, or on Zoom/Teams.
- Being concise and scheduling the meeting for no more than 45 minutes.
- Offer to meet at non-peak hours (if this fits with your schedule), such as over lunch, during your commute, or right before or after their workday starts or ends.
- Send the questions over in advance, so the employers are prepared and come ready to share.
- Conducting one-on-one meetings, or setting up a round table to speak with multiple employers at once.

## 3. Conducting discovery interviews with employers

The questions you ask during the discovery interview should leave you with an understanding of the following:

- The employer's operating environment to understand how they view and manage risk.
- The talent challenges they are facing that's keeping them up at night.
- How they have already tried, or are currently trying, to solve this challenge, what's working, what isn't and why.
- The standards and indicators employers use to evaluate candidates and their interview and hiring processes.

Approaching employer discovery interviews with curiosity and a desire to learn will help you get the most out of these conversations. Remember you are there to listen and learn to inform your program design, rather than to ask questions to validate a proposed solution. While you may go into the interview with a set list of questions, don't be afraid to go off track if you hit on something important to the employer. Keep your questions open-ended and start with broad questions to understand the industry and its current operating challenges; then, move to more targeted questions. Remember to keep it conversational!

It is always helpful to have at least two members from your organization in the discovery meetings. One person can be tasked with leading the conversation, and the other person can focus on taking notes and asking follow-up questions as required. You also might consider asking the employer if it is okay to record the session, so you can revisit the conversation.

Wrap up the discovery session reiterating what you have heard, sharing some next steps such as when they can expect to hear more from you, and thanking them for their time. Remember - when an employer feels like you're really listening, they begin to trust that you understand their problem. Trust is a key requirement for getting employers to participate in your program and hire your participants.

#### 4. Sample initial questions for employers

To further assist your employer discovery interviews, below you will find some general sample questions to get you started in preparing for a one-on-one discovery meeting with an employer.

##### *Objectives:*

- Understand employer pain points when it comes to talent and elements are required for a solution to be successful.

- Gather an understanding of the key requirements and outcomes for a program.

*Understanding current business needs*

1. What is going on in your organization right now? What are the major trends you are seeing across your industry?
2. What do the next 12–24 months look like? Any plans for growth? What are you focused on?
3. What are the top challenges you face?
4. Imagine this problem no longer exists and was successfully solved... What does that success look like? How has your life/job/day changed?
5. What approaches have you already tried to solve this problem? What about those attempted solutions worked and what didn't?
6. Are others experiencing this problem? Who? How do you know?
7. What's working right now? What isn't?
8. How are problems currently impacting you? Your team? Your business?

*Specific questions around talent:*

1. How have your talent needs changed over time? What's different about the challenges you're facing today? What do you anticipate future talent needs to be?
2. How have these challenges around talent impacted your business?
3. Where do you usually recruit from? What kinds of candidates do you generally hire? How often do you deviate from your job post requirements (ie. hiring workers with different credentials or work experience than you define as required)
4. What are your non-negotiables for hiring? Are there certain skills, characteristics or other considerations that are absolute requirements for candidates?
5. How do you define success when it comes to finding talent?