

Ontario Workforce Pillar Consultation: A Commentary



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What did we do?

In July 2021, CCYP (Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity) was invited to partake in an Ontario government (Ministry of Labour) consultation led by a ministry appointed 7-person [Workforce Recovery Committee](#). The purpose of the consultations was to help with Ontario's economic recovery and "provide recommendations to position Ontario as the best place in North America to recruit, retain and reward workers." [1] This commentary aims to share our experience of the consultation and opinions on the process, with the public. The recovery committee, comprised of economists, public policy scholars academics, lawyers, tech entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, framed the consultation around the 3 following workforce pillars and questions:

1. **Economic recovery:** How to make Ontario the top jurisdiction with a world-class workforce and talent supply?
2. **Strengthening Ontario's competitive position:** In an increasingly remote, global and technologically advanced economy, how will we ensure that Ontario remains the best place in North America to recruit, retain, and reward workers?
3. **Supporting workers:** How to ensure Ontario's technology platform workers benefit from flexibility, control, and security?

The pillars together address important themes and aspects of labour in a pandemic context, such as labour force training (Pillar 1), the transition to and normalisation of remote/hybrid work (Pillar 2) and terms of employment for the precariously employed, which includes gig workers for tech platforms like Uber and Foodora (Pillar 3). Each pillar had its own virtual consultation session, with the CCYP being invited to sessions on Pillar 2 (**Strengthening Ontario's competitive position**), with the 2 subtopics under this pillar being "Keeping and Attracting Talent to Ontario in a Virtual Working World" and "TalentMatch.Ont for Employers and Employees".

What is a 'consultation', and what was the objective?

Consultations like these are normal at all levels of governments in Canada, and a normal government process in democracies when creating or adjusting policy, as those who stand to be most affected (stakeholders) by any rule or policy changes, should have a say in shaping their own plights.

[1] Ontario Workforce Advisory Committee [website](#).

The main objective of these consultations, like any other consultation, is to hear informed opinions and perspectives from those who operate in, and who will be affected by any policy changes to be made by the government in a particular area/sector. In this case, it was to hear from stakeholders in the labour market (employers, employees, unions, education and labour scholars/experts) on what they thought the main issues were re: Ontario's labour market, and how best the government could accommodate and respond to their needs.

In addition to these live consultations, there was also the option to make written submissions, which the CCYP also did and can be found [here](#). [2]

Who else was at the consultations?

With the exception of CCYP and a public policy (Munk School) professor from the University of Toronto, the other consultation participants were largely concentrated in the technology industry, largely on the employer/employing side. These included start-up chairs, venture capitalists, IT consultants, A.I. and technology researchers and human resource group representatives.

What did we say?

The CCYP's focus during these discussions was to articulate the youth perspective through the results of CCYP's own research and information. As such, we shared our findings from the focus group discussions conducted during our Impact COVID project, to highlight issues relevant to youth and the need to invest in areas related to youth workforce development. Youth have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic because the industries that employed a larger share of youth, such as food and accommodation services, were more strongly impacted by the pandemic limits on in-person service. Moreover, since youth are in the prime working years of their life and have a longer time remaining in the labor force as compared to the rest of the population, it is imperative to invest in issues relevant to youth in order to develop and strengthen Ontario's workforce.

[2] [Link to brief](#)

Currently, Ontario lags behind particularly Quebec [3] in youth employment outcomes and over the years has displayed an increase in youth unemployment and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) rates. This leads to a disgruntled and demotivated workforce. One of the key factors identified behind this trend is the fragmented policy making apparatus for Ontario's youth workforce development. This was also a point raised by CCYP during the discussions.

One of the key aspects of the discussion was the flexibility offered by the independent, contractual work or the 'gig' economy to workers. CCYP raised the inequalities associated with such type of work particularly for young people. While such type of work involves higher financial reward and flexibility to professionals possessing experience and expertise in a specific technical domain, it did not bode well for young workers working in the food and hospitality sector.

Moreover, the issue of the 'Digital Divide' was raised as well. The lack of affordability and access to urban poor and rural residents respectively was highlighted as a key issue hampering the participation of segments of Ontario's population in an increasingly digital world. Moreover, the lack of access to computer hardware for low-income demographics was also pointed out by CCYP as a factor constraining the development of digital literacy and therefore hindering the workforce competitiveness of Ontario.

With recent reports of skills gaps and studies demonstrating demand for college diplomas among university graduates, CCYP recommended better recognition for college diplomas. The increased desirability of college diplomas in the labor market and investment towards enhancing their recognition could go a long way towards improving the skills mismatch in the province.

Another point raised by CCYP was the increased involvement of employers in the training of their workforce. Overall, Canada has seen a decline in employer investment in the training of their workforce. By encouraging increased investment in workforce training, particularly of young employees, employers can reap the benefits of an increasingly productive workforce with overall gains for the province as a whole.

[3] Together Ontario and Quebec constitute 60% of the Canadian population.

One of the questions raised during the meeting was about the shortage of skilled labor in the Trades sector. CCYP recommended increased interventions in the labor market to highlight the career options available to students in areas outside of traditional university education.

Commentary

As a non-profit organization, it was a positive thing to be included in this consultation, making a case for a youth-inclusive recovery more directly to the decision makers (through the committee). However, there are some points of contention with this consultation process, which we believe are worth raising.

Consultation Content

While the sessions had guiding themes as stated above, the line of questioning adopted by the members of the Committee steered away from the original theme of the session. The questions asked by the Committee were more broad-based with focus on the needs of the employers and the type of support they required to be competitive with respect to other jurisdictions. While it is important to listen to the concerns of the business community as the employers represent an important component of workforce development, businesses are profit driven and sometimes their goals are not aligned with public objectives. Therefore, a more holistic policy making process would have involved soliciting the opinion of a multitude of stakeholder particularly the representatives of labor.

The pillars and session subtopics also had some premises that are worth examining. Firstly, given the pandemic-induced recession led to more un(der)employment, the focus on labour supply, instead of demand (re-hiring) in the first two pillars (workers/talent) is questionable. While the third pillar looks to address gig workers, “benefiting from flexibility” assumes gig workers enjoy the conditions of their work. In a consultation with mainly employers and tech entrepreneurs, it was unsurprising that the leading perspective was that being an ‘independent contractor’ [4] is great and gives workers flexibility to do other things with their time;

[4] This is what tech platform workers (Uber, Foodora etc) are classified as.

it is also worth noting that this arrangement saves employers money on operating costs and benefits/coverages for workers. [5]

While this may be true for older, more experienced tech sector workers i.e., analysts, developers and engineers who are higher earners, it is just not the case for everyone else. E.g., non-tech workers or youth, who need time to pick up skill on the job, benefits and some type of job security that such independent contractor arrangements do not offer. Precarious work, which includes gig work, is characterized by a combination of “uncertainty, low income and limited social benefits”. [6] In fact, Canadian youth also have the highest rate of participation of any Canadian demographic in such precarious work, with more than half of youth (58%) reporting being employed in such a job in 2019, and almost half (42%) of them relying on such jobs as their main source of income. [7] Therefore, trying to normalize or expand such arrangements in the province, would not bode well for non-tech workers or youths’ futures, and for the province’s economic wellbeing and future as a whole.

However, CCYP was one of only two non-tech or entrepreneur related participants across our two sessions. As the only youth and non-tech sector voice involved in our consultations, we provided a different and necessary perspective in the consultations. While it is possible that written submissions came from a wider range of players, a consultation on the labour market should include more than just the tech sector. For a consultation on labour which directly affects 63.5% of Ontarians 15 and older [8] and many more indirectly, there should be a wider and more diverse pool of participants, more representative of those who might be most affected or best benefit from improving the 3 pillars outlined. The discussions, and by extension the decisions made down the line, would have benefitted from other voices including union reps, career counsellors, labour economists and some more presence from the social/employment services sector. This diversity of opinions would have been beneficial for example, in a conversation about improving terms of employment for the precariously employed, which includes tech platform (gig) workers. Here, employers, tech entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, have different perspectives from youth, union representatives or labour economists, as the latter groups understand that an economy cannot comprise only tech workers, entrepreneurs and independent contractors.

[5] Bargaining Tech: Strategies for Shaping Technological Change to Benefit Workers, by Jim Stanford and Kathy Bennett (Vancouver: Centre for Future Work), June 2021, pp. 18-22; <https://centreforfuturework.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/Bargaining-Tech.pdf>

[6] Future of Work is Now: Creating Decent Work Post-Pandemic by Sunil Johal (Public Policy Forum) June 2020.

[7] Size and Characteristics of Informal (Gig) Work in Canada by Bank of Canada. June 2019. Gig workers are classified as self employed by the ICT based platforms like Uber, Amazon etc., and so do not qualify for employment insurance or other worker protections. Youth here refers to those aged 18-24

[8] July 2021 Ontario labour participation rate (shows the share of the population aged 15+, working or actively looking for work. [Table 14-10-0287-03 Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted](#)

Process

In addition to the content of the discussion, the consultation process could have been more robust and open.

Our opinion on this provincial process is informed by the CCYP's previous experiences at consultations, as well as impressions from other stakeholders. [9] Earlier in the year, the CCYP was involved in Federal government consultations on making adjustments to labour regulations in the Federally regulated sectors, particularly the 'right to disconnect'. [10] Those consultations had about 9 iterative rounds wherein participants met, gave feedback to Federal Ministry of Labour and Human Resources officials. These officials would in turn, return to their ministry to see if data matched points made during consultations and return feedback to participants, who would also take the government feedback to their constituents, before returning for another consultation round. While the Federal consultation lasted for a month and half, these Ontario consultations lasted a little less than a month, occurred in the middle of the summer when workers often take leave and had a compressed timeline for written submissions—the deadline was a week after our virtual consultation sessions. Whereas the Federal Panel had representatives from across the federally regulated sectors (independent businesses, banking associations, extraction sector, trucking associations and labour union reps) and NGOs, the consultations we attended were almost entirely made of participants from solely the technology sector. Lastly, while the Federal consultations were run and convened by Federal government employees from the aforementioned ministries, the Ontario session was run and convened by a combination of a polling company and members of the workforce committee.

Jim Stafford of the Centre for Future Work also makes a similar observation, calling this round of Ontario consultations “rushed” and contrasting its timeline and diversity (or lack thereof) of participants, with previous Ontario government labour consultations like the Workplaces Review of 2015–17, which had independent experts across sectors and original commissioned research. [11]

The Ontario government should be commended for attempting to address pressing labour issues which the pandemic has exacerbated. However, to truly deal with, and improve the future of Work in Ontario, such consultation must include a wider scope of questioning and better representation of the workers whom the government purports to make life easier for.

[9] Jim Stanford, [Centre for FutureWork Submission](#) to the Ontario Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee. July 2021.; [A new committee is exploring the future of work — but critics say it lacks a crucial voice: workers](#) by Sara Mojtahedzadeh. Toronto Star. June 25 2021.

[10] For more on this, see our previous snapshot on Federally Regulated Sectors [here](#).

[11] [Centre for FutureWork Submission](#) to the Ontario Workforce Recovery Advisory Committee. p 8.