



An exploration of the people challenges in Canadian Higher Education Institutions

Nous Group

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Introduction

Higher education institutions in Canada are currently facing a plethora of challenges, including rising operating costs, stagnant tuition fees, and limited provincial funding. While Canadian institutions have historically weathered rising operating costs with increases in international enrolment, in 2024 the federal government announced an international study permit cap. With uncertain long-term government funding, institutions must make difficult decisions about how to save costs and generate revenue for sustainability.

We engaged with leaders from more than twelve Canadian institutions to better understand the people challenges of today. These ranged from members of the U15 to small universities in more remote areas. Despite their diverse characteristics, they face similar financial pressures and challenges in supporting their people and culture. This review brought to light several key themes. Now is the time to:

- Experiment with new ways to create **strong connections between academia and administration**
- Equip leaders who can think **commercially, navigate complexity, and work differently**
- Future-proof workforces with the capabilities and mindsets to **adapt to new contexts and disruption**
- Clarify and sharpen employee value propositions to **recruit and retain top talent**
- Embed performance processes to **clarify expectations and foster employee growth and engagement**
- **Focus on knowledge and skill transfer** to mitigate risk of high retirement volumes





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In this paper, we explore how Canadian institutions can address these people and culture challenges. We will highlight great practices we uncovered in Canada and share strategies from other jurisdictions and sectors. Our recommendations are designed to be layered. Institutions will benefit most when they consider all elements but adopt a thoughtful, staged approach to change. We advise assessing your institution's level of maturity to determine what is realistic to achieve. We have provided a high-level maturity model in Figure 1 overleaf.

This report outlines three focus areas for institutions along with practical strategies to adopt:

FOCUS AREA 1

People power: Build world-leading HR functions

STRATEGY A

Set the foundations for excellence in end-to-end HR

STRATEGY B

Strengthen HR as a strategic business enabler

FOCUS AREA 2

Reimagine capability: Leaders and workforces to enable institutional transformation

STRATEGY A

Embed leadership models and capabilities that will enable the future

STRATEGY B

Build a future-ready, digitally enabled workforce

FOCUS AREA 3

Chosen workplaces: Solidify institutions as great places to work

STRATEGY A

Develop compelling employee value propositions

STRATEGY B

Embed talent and succession into institution ethos

Figure 1

Institutional people and culture maturity model



People power: Build world- leading HR functions

Strong HR functions provide the backbone for addressing people and culture challenges in Canadian institutions. Research shows that investing in HR can deliver improved organizational outcomes and help create competitive advantage, enabling institutions to effectively leverage its people and culture.¹

Yet our consultations across the sector revealed that many institutions are still establishing strong foundations. People and HR leaders reported several consistent challenges in their teams including:

1. **Inefficient or unclear processes** – Many HR processes are unclear, cumbersome and lack standardization, leading to inefficiencies across the institution. Institutions rely heavily on people to know the process which places them at risk if those key people are unavailable or leave the institution.
2. **Inconsistent team structures and ways of working** – The delivery of HR services requires whole-of-institution effort, as many activities are delivered across the institution, not just in the core HR function itself. Despite best intentions, effort is often siloed. This, coupled with inconsistent standards, prevents a unified, institution-wide approach that still enables uniqueness in delivery for clients when needed.
3. **Outdated technology and systems** – Many HR functions rely on legacy, outdated or non-optimized systems, which hinders the delivery of efficient, streamlined and modern HR operations.

These challenges were consistent across the diverse group of institutions engaged. While the underlying drivers of these challenges differ, the need to address these issues is a common sector priority. Solving these issues can help build leading HR functions that underpin world-class institutions.

Set the foundations for excellence in end-to-end HR

This transition cannot happen overnight. This section outlines the necessary steps for ensuring that strong HR foundations are in place. There are four key elements that should be addressed to set the foundations for excellence in HR.



Any service or faculty specific roles must be unique and not duplicate roles, responsibilities or activities delivered through other HR roles.

1. Define the end-to-end HR service offering for clients

Every HR function must define the services it delivers to support students, faculty and staff and articulate where these services are best delivered across the institution. These services will include core functions like recruitment, pension, payroll and benefits, learning and development and labour relations, along with services that are institution-specific based on the institution's unique strategy or needs. The "client" must be at the centre of the service offer.

In practice, defining the service offer can take many forms. The University of California, Berkeley has a publicly available HR service commitment document that outlines all HR services, the staff member responsible for them, and the timeline for resolution.² Similarly, University of York outlines its HR vision, purpose and all HR services with expected timelines for resolution of requests.³ The service offering will evolve over time. Smaller and less mature HR functions do not need to offer everything and can make incremental improvements as they build expertise and resources.

2. Purposefully design HR roles to deliver services across the institution

Once a HR function defines its service offering, it must ensure the right team is in place to effectively deliver those services. The service offering should categorize tasks based on their complexity and nature. Generally, transactional, repetitive and routine tasks should be automated and handled by consolidated teams to promote standardization and efficiency. This approach enables specialization, both for staff who deliver transactions and other HR professionals, either within the core HR teams or in individual services and faculties, allowing them to focus on work directly aligned to their role.

There are four key value adding roles that HR functions can deliver. When designing roles, consideration should be given to the type of work each role delivers. Each role will have a specific mix of the following:

- **Strategy and standards** – Support the institution's mission by translating institutional strategy into people and HR strategies policies, processes and standards. Roles that focus on strategy should perform minimal transactional activities (i.e. no more than 20 per cent of their time on transactions).
- **Advisory and advocacy** – Provide contextual advice or specialist expertise to help faculties, services and people leaders support their people. Act as an advocate by translating client needs to inform priorities and service provision. These types of roles should also perform minimal transactions.
- **Analytics and reporting** – Provide purposeful data analytics and reporting to measure and manage the institution's people performance and inform decisions. This can include employee engagement, performance and work health and safety data.
- **Transactional** – Develop infrastructure and efficient processes to support high-volume, standardized transactions with reliability and cost-effectiveness. Transactional roles should be specialized and focused on a select set of activities and only perform transactional activities in one function.

There will often be unit-specific HR activities that need to be delivered. Any service or faculty specific roles must be unique and not duplicate roles, responsibilities or activities delivered through other HR roles.

3. Streamline and clarify the processes in place to deliver

The next step to building a strong HR foundation is to ensure that the right processes are in place. Many institutions reflected that their cumbersome HR processes frequently led to significant inefficiencies. To address this, there are two options, and the choice between them will depend on each institution's current context.

- **Option 1 – Improve what you have.** The first option is to streamline your current processes (i.e. through a lean process review). This method involves quickly analyzing pain points and bottlenecks, brainstorming solutions and implementing improvements. Avoid highly detailed current state reviews. Quickly identifying key pain points and focusing on solutions enables faster progress with less effort and fewer resources.
- **Option 2 – Implement new best practices.** The second option is to implement new end-to-end best practice processes, so instead of implementing changes to current processes, you design based on best practice and implement the new end-to-end process. This process still requires stakeholder and client engagement to ensure the best practice is tailored for the specific institutional context.

Either option can deliver benefits. For example, the University of South Carolina underwent a series of lean process reviews for its HR function.⁴ Following this review, the university reduced its 104-step process to 54 steps and its process time reduced from ten to five days. Many Canadian institutions are also currently experimenting with this method.

4. Expand use of technology and AI to improve institution wide people outcomes

The final element is applying and expanding the use of technology to improve institution-wide people outcomes. To keep up with the increasing workload demand placed on professionals at universities, it is imperative that HR embraces technology and AI. While large scale system Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) changes may not be feasible in the current fiscal environment, we have found that many institutions are not fully or best utilizing the systems and technology tools that they have. Institutions could move faster with smaller technology improvements and AI implementation along their digital transformation journey to deliver step-change improvements.

The use of AI is transforming HR functions. For example, the University of Ottawa is currently enhancing its HR unit. Part of this transformation includes the implementation of an HR chat bot to support self-service. The HR team invested in the development of an HR knowledge base as part of implementation so the AI chat bot could be trained to successfully respond to basic queries from clients. This has already reduced turnaround times for queries and enables the team to focus on specialized issues and strategic priorities.

To keep up with the increasing workload demand placed on professionals at universities, it is imperative that HR embraces technology and AI. While large scale system ERP changes may not be feasible in the current fiscal environment, we have found that many institutions are not fully or best utilizing the systems and technology tools that they have.

Strengthen HR as a strategic business enabler

With strong foundations, the HR function can grow its role as a strategic business enabler. In this section, we explore three features that define the HR function of the future, along with practical activities HR functions can implement right now to achieve this vision.



1. HR collects and leverages data to proactively lift workforce performance and engagement

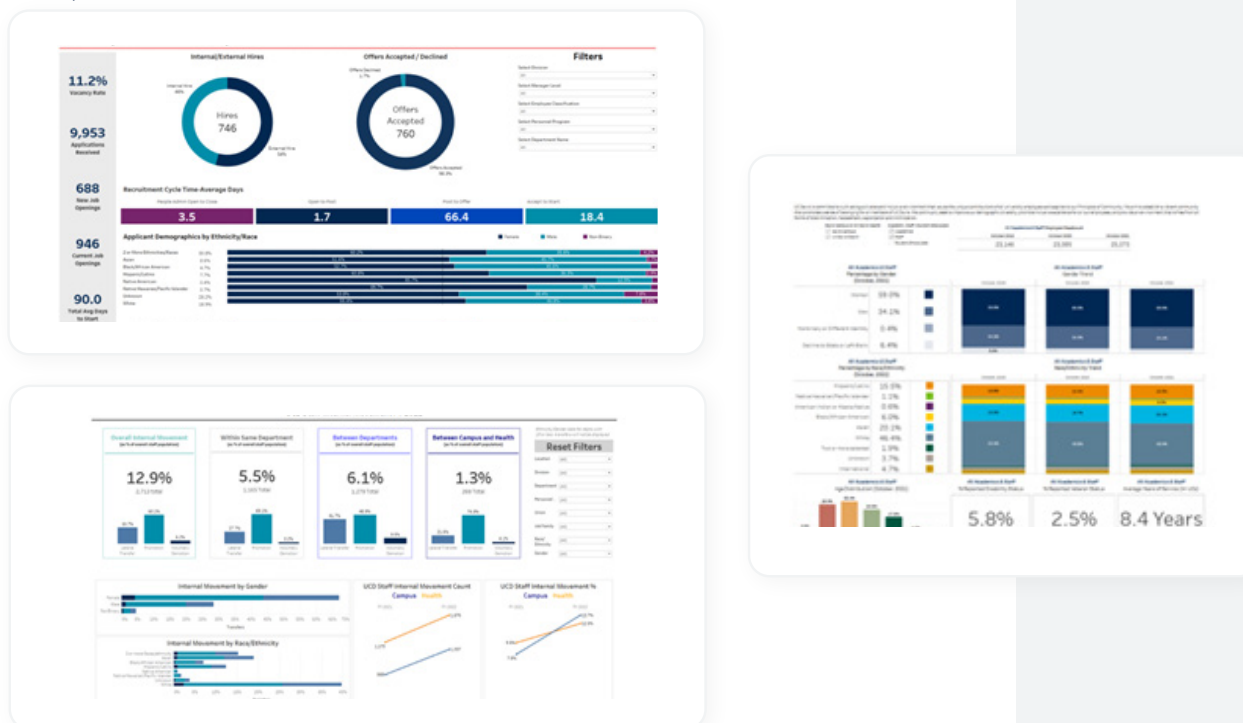
Strong data and information integrity is a fundamental requirement for a modern HR function. Utilizing people data effectively is a strategic differentiator for institutions and HR functions should be at the forefront of delivery of these efforts. Below are some first steps to improve data-driven HR capability:

- **Collect accurate and accessible workforce data:** Build databases and warehouses that collect critical information to support effective workforce management. Important information may include workforce composition, employee workload and individual performance metrics. Ensure that this data can be accessed by institutional leaders to enable shared ownership of people priorities and help inform their decision-making.
- **Establish institution-wide people and culture Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Define and monitor KPIs related to critical areas such as employee engagement, workplace climate and civility, retention and team performance. Regularly analyze metrics to understand the effectiveness of people and culture initiatives on performance.
- **Establish proactive discussions on people, culture and workforce data with units:** Enable access to data tools and insights from dashboards to proactively engage with service and faculty leaders on potential hotspots. Work with units to tackle issues before they escalate into larger problems.

The key is to be realistic about what you can track and measure. We know many institutions struggle with challenges like data accessibility and quality. Imperfect data can help to determine which data is meaningful and useful and shape data priorities moving forward.

Figure 2

Example of dashboards for HR data⁵

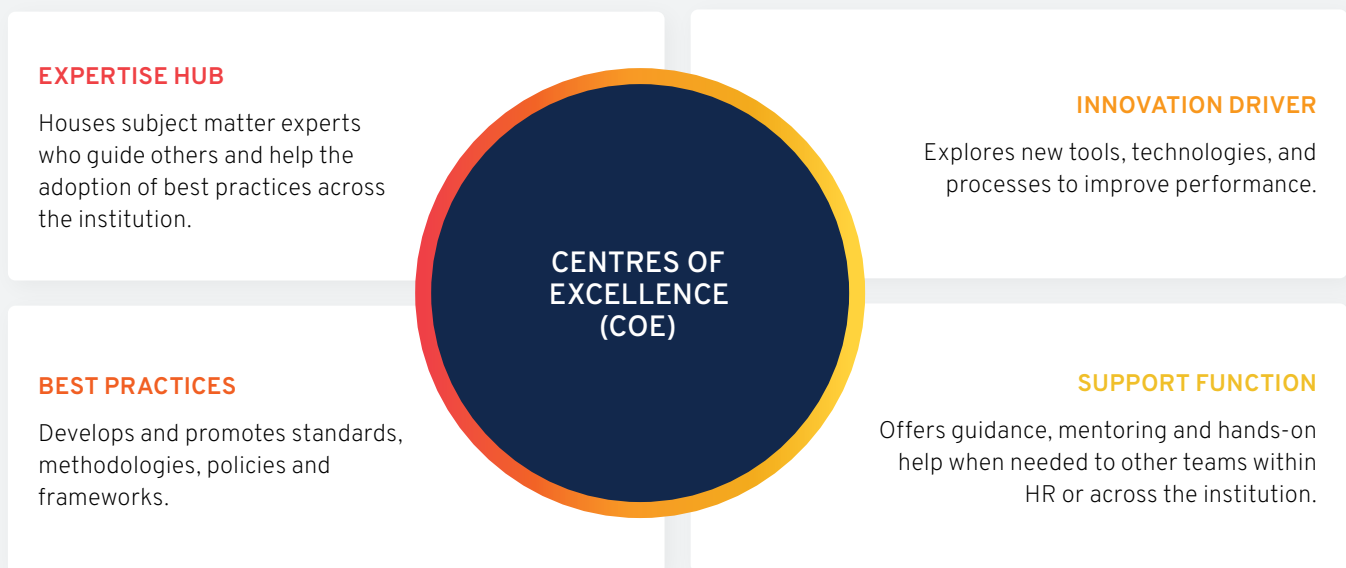


2. Centres of excellence advise on areas of expertise

During our consultations, leaders expressed the need to reduce costs and improve standardization across their institutions by providing greater clarity around how HR services are delivered end-to-end. Further, they highlighted the need for HR to have expertise in specialist areas such as role and organizational design, talent acquisition, performance management, and learning and development. CoE can house specialized teams that provide leadership, best practices, support and training for a specific HR area (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Centres of excellence (CoE)



3. HR business partner model to help build cross-institutional partnerships to deliver advice

During consultations, HR leaders expressed a desire for their teams to shift towards strategic and proactive work. A recurring theme was the importance of aligning HR initiatives with an institution's overarching mission. The level of strategic and structural importance that HR functions have differs across Canada. HR functions can enhance their value and role by ensuring they lead with client centredness, structuring their effort and resources around what is most important to their students, faculty and staff.

To move towards this, Canadian institutions can consider adopting or enhancing their HR business partner (HRBP) model(s). At its core, the HRBP role is designed to serve as a strategic conduit between faculties and services and the broader HR function, providing a single, trusted point of contact for all HR-related matters. When implemented well, HRBPs can offer holistic, proactive support that integrates academic labour relations, talent management, organizational development, and workforce planning. The benefits of the HRBP model are outlined in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Benefits of best practice HRBP model



To be effective, HRBPs need a broad set of capabilities. These include strong technical HR knowledge across all domains, critical thinking, data analysis skills to inform decisions and deep experience in labour and employee relations—particularly in the academic context. Success in the role also depends on the ability to build trust and credibility with senior academic and administration leaders.

To unlock the value of the HRBP model, institutions must be intentional in its design and implementation. One of the most critical factors is freeing HRBPs from routine transactional activities, which are often a barrier to HRBPs' capacity and strategic impact. HRBPs must also be deeply embedded in the units they support, physically or virtually, so they can participate in planning conversations and build familiarity with local contexts. The role is most effective when HRBPs are treated as part of the faculty or service leadership team, rather than as external resources. Institutions should also ensure clear boundaries and collaboration protocols between HRBPs, CoEs and transactional teams, to support seamless service delivery. Access to timely and relevant HR data and analytics is another enabler, empowering HRBPs to provide evidence-based insights and guidance.

The HRBP model doesn't have to be one-size-fits-all. Globally, successful implementations have been seen with different HRBP configurations. Some HRBPs are embedded directly within faculties, while others are centrally located and assigned to specific client groups. Ultimately, the right model is one that reflects the institution's culture and structure, while staying grounded in clear roles, strategic intent, and an unwavering focus on client needs.

Reimagine capability: Leaders and workforces to enable institutional transformation

Workforces across all sectors are facing a range of pressures, including having to adapt to rapid AI and technological advancement and evolving capability demands requiring greater specialist skillsets. Institutions that swiftly and purposefully equip their leaders and workforce with the necessary capabilities can achieve significant reputational, performance and financial benefits. There needs to be a focus on people leaders and uplifting their ability to manage and lead their workforce needs.

To accomplish this, institutions should adopt two key strategies:

- A. Embed leadership models and capabilities that will enable the future**
- B. Build future-ready, digitally enabled workforces**

Reimagining existing expectations of leaders will be a crucial first step to guiding the development of a future ready, digitally enabled workforce.

STRATEGY A

Embed leadership models and capabilities that will enable the future

During our consultations, it became clear that there is a critical need for institutional leadership models to transform to effectively guide institutions and their people. To deliver on this strategy, institutions must clarify new leadership models and capabilities needed for success and implement innovative ways to develop leaders.



1. Clarify the leadership models and capabilities needed for success

Many consistently expressed a desire for leaders who can think strategically, influence change and foster collaboration. Those leaders who stood out across institutions are those who bring strong business acumen skills and can make tough decisions. While the desired skillset may be clear, many current leaders often lack these essential skills as they have not been prioritized in the past. Many leaders are thrust into people leadership positions without appropriate experience, development and support.

The first step is to ensure the foundations are laid in leadership and governance models. Best practice leadership and governance models recognize the importance of both formal and informal structures in driving meaningful transformation and change. Progress cannot be made in silos. Academic and administrative leaders, including Deans, Vice Deans, AVPs and Directors, must work together through intentional, well-structured forums. Without consistent and collaborative engagement, strategic and change efforts are unlikely to gain traction.

Based on the insights gathered from these consultations, two key leadership approaches could be useful references to reimagine the future leadership required in institutions.

- **Enterprise Leadership** approaches describe leaders who think, collaborate, and inspire across all functions and teams, moving away from the traditional approach of hierarchical, function-specific leadership.⁶ These leaders shift their focus from unit to collective success of the enterprise (or in our case, the institution). Research shows that enterprise leaders create more innovative, engaged and adaptive teams, generate higher client satisfaction, and improve financial outcomes.⁷
- **Adaptive leadership** approaches focus on enabling dynamic, action-oriented processes rather than traditional leadership traits. Adaptive leaders foster empathy, experiment with innovative solutions, and reward performance through autonomy, avoiding micromanagement. They propel organizations forward by asking challenging questions that drive teams to adapt.

2. Implement innovative ways to develop leaders

While, many institutions are beginning to invest in layered leadership programs there is more that can be done. Here we provide three ways to build the next wave of enterprise and adaptive leaders. These consider current institutional budget and time constraints and encourage leadership development embedded in the day to day.

Immersive experiences

People learn best from experience and immersions. Immersive experiences like simulations, observation and action learning take leaders out of their comfort zone to drive change. A way in which this can be done is through “smart shocking”.⁸ Smart shocks are intentional, managed and strategic interventions that leaders know are going to push them towards disequilibrium. In addition, purposefully designed adaptive leadership programs can also benefit leaders at all levels. For instance, Nous partnered with AGSM@UNSW and Harvard experts to co-design a program for Australia Defence. This program uses readiness-based modules and case-in-point immersions to enhance leaders’ capacity to tackle real-world complexities.⁹

Learning by working on the organization's priorities

During our consultations we heard that there is often a large divide between academic and administrative leaders. This creates inconsistency in strategic direction and priority setting within institutions, despite being aligned on overall mission. One way in which institutions can bridge this divide and develop both their administrative and academic leaders is by designing leadership development programs that bring these groups together in ways that are aligned towards their strategic goals. For example, Nous worked with an Australian university to develop a global leader program that would give it a competitive edge and strategic and cultural advantage. By aligning leadership development with its strategic priorities and aligning leadership development activities to make progress on strategy, the university successfully unified its academic and administrative leaders around common challenges, empowering them forward.

Leaders learning from leaders

Another effective strategy institutions can use, drawing from good practice outside of the sector, is to create a culture of developing leaders through current leaders. Leaders from across the institution can be invited share insights and build capability by cascading learning and role modelling desired behaviours. This can be an effective technique in also bringing together academic and administrative leaders from across the institution.

An example of this in practice is Microsoft’s “Model, Coach, Care” leadership development framework.¹⁰ This framework emphasizes that managers lead by example and model the desired behaviours through their own actions (“model”). They actively coach their team members to develop their skills by providing feedback and opportunities for growth (“coach”). They show a genuine care for their team members’ professional growth and well-being, creating a supportive environment (“care”).

Build a future-ready, digitally enabled workforce

The delivery of change and transformation in institutions requires every member of that institution to adapt. To complement efforts to bolster leadership, institutions must think about how they shape the broader workforce for the future and equip people with the necessary capabilities and tools for success.



During our consultations, institutional leaders highlighted four consistent capabilities they believe are needed for their future workforce which are summarized in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Future workforce capabilities required for institutional success



DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital innovations are driving institutions to reconsider their operations. Technology and AI are reshaping the landscape, altering skill requirements and necessitating a digitally capable workforce. Institutions must become technology and AI-enabled with digitally literate employees.



COMMERCIAL ACUMEN

In a resource-constrained environment, institutions should enhance commercial acumen within their workforce. With limited government funding, adopting a commercial mindset and learning from other sectors is crucial for financial sustainability.



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Continuous improvement is a crucial capability for a future-proofed workforce. By regularly evaluating and refining services, processes, and products, institutions can stay responsive to the evolving needs of students, faculty and staff.



CROSS-BOUNDARY COLLABORATION

Effective collaboration across boundaries is essential for institutions. Siloes and divisions frequently exist between administrative and academic staff. Bridging these gaps and fostering mutual understanding and teamwork are vital to achieving success.

Digital literacy

As the higher education sector embraces digital tools, institutions must harness technology fully to deliver higher-quality services, increase efficiency, and improve financial sustainability. There are three key digital skills that will define the future workforce, including both academic and administrative staff in institutions:

1. **AI and digital tools:** Institutions are adopting advanced digital tools and AI to reduce manual tasks. Staff must effectively navigate and adopt these tools.
2. **Data analytics:** Strong data foundations are essential for addressing institutional challenges. All staff should have basic data analysis and interpretation skills to contribute to data-driven decision-making.
3. **Information security:** Increasing digitization heightens risks such as data breaches and cyberattacks. Staff must understand information security to protect personal information and maintain integrity.

WHAT THE INSTITUTION CAN DO

Engage staff in testing and deploying new AI tools and collect feedback throughout the process. Establish policies and infrastructure to protect sensitive information, such as multi-factor authentication and access controls.

WHAT HR TEAMS CAN DO

Identify workforce gaps in digital capabilities using frameworks like the Jisc Digital Capabilities Framework.¹¹ Create forums for staff to share best practices and support each other's digital skills development. Ensure clear channels for reporting information security incidents.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO

Participate in tailored training programs to enhance digital skills. For example, the University of Queensland has a Systems Training Hub with dedicated resources to support digital skills adoption for staff.¹²

Commercial acumen

Institutional leaders recognize the need for greater commercial acumen to address financial sustainability challenges. Institutions must develop strategies to generate revenue, manage costs, and ensure long-term viability. Key elements of commercial acumen for faculty and staff include:

1. **Understanding operations:** A deep understanding of institutional operations and the drivers of revenues and costs is key to ensuring people have foundational awareness to make good decisions.
2. **Financial analysis:** People across the institution should be able to interpret financial statements, budgets, and key metrics to make informed decisions about staffing, compensation, and budgeting.
3. **Strategic analysis and planning:** Building skills in strategy across all levels is key to help align initiatives with broader institutional goals, anticipate future challenges, and develop solutions.

Continuous improvement and cross-boundary collaboration

Continuous improvement is essential for a future-proofed workforce, involving the ongoing evaluation and refinement of services, processes and products. It ensures institutions remain responsive to students, faculty and staff. Key barriers to continuous improvement in institutions include:¹³

1. **Recognizing the need for change but fear getting it wrong:** Institutions are organizations which naturally focus on excellence - in research, teaching and academia. The challenge with this is an openness to imperfection. At times, people fear making mistakes and there can be lower tolerance for this across the institution.
2. **Lacking a regular focus on continuous improvement:** Continuous improvement requires persistent effort and commitment, not a reliance on major transformations. It needs buy-in from all stakeholders.
3. **Underestimating the need for engagement:** Successful continuous improvement involves genuine user engagement to understand their experiences, involving users in designing changes and the provision of support to enable adoption.

WHAT THE INSTITUTION CAN DO

Encourage inter-departmental collaboration and utilize business faculty expertise to share insights and best practices.

WHAT HR TEAMS CAN DO

Ensure leaders understand and communicate the importance of commercial acumen. Offer targeted professional development in financial analysis, strategic analysis and planning.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS CAN DO

Engage in cross-team collaboration to learn about broader operations. Seek opportunities to understand the business aspects of the institution and work more efficiently and reflect on how to continue to maximize time and resources to support the institution's ongoing sustainability.

The best way to develop cross-boundary collaboration is to align teams and people around common goals and challenges. Continuous improvement initiatives are a great way to build these skills.

Five key principles underpin successful continuous improvement and cross-boundary collaboration efforts.

1. **Align on strategic direction:** Articulate a long-term vision that continuous improvement initiatives support and measure efforts against this vision.
2. **Start simple:** Begin with straightforward changes to build confidence and capability, minimizing disruption and allowing for learning before tackling significant changes.
3. **Create excitement:** Motivate and enthuse staff, especially long-tenured employees. Celebrate successes to build momentum and encourage participation.
4. **Focus on better, not perfect:** Concentrate on achievable short-term changes to maintain momentum. This allows for quick feedback and faster implementation.
5. **Upskill staff:** Provide opportunities for staff to develop new skills. This meaningful engagement can enhance employee development and engagement.

Chosen workplaces: Solidifying institutions as great places to work

STRATEGY A

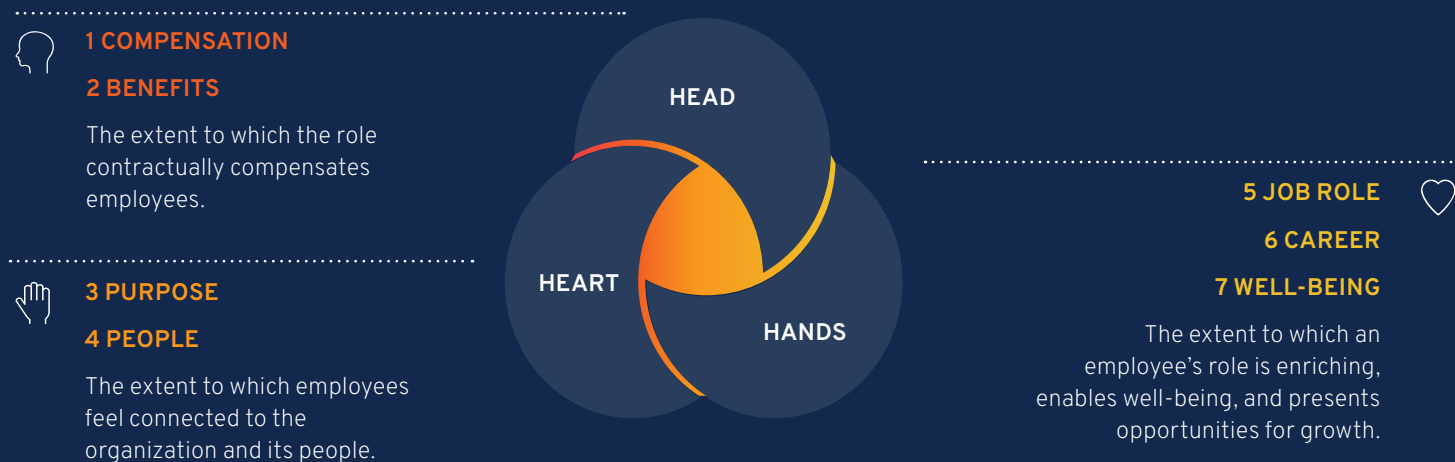
Develop compelling employee value propositions

Canadian institutions shared that they have faced challenges attracting and retaining top talent, noting that the employee value proposition (EVP) of working in higher education lags behind other sectors. Common issues include workload management, wellbeing, and equity, diversity and inclusion.



Figure 6

Seven factors of an effective employee value proposition



What we heard through our consultations is consistent with the literature stating that recruitment of strong academics is competitive, and attraction of high quality senior professional staff remains a challenge due to competition with other sectors.¹⁴ What is required are paths to development and career progression, a flexible working environment and enhanced staff benefits. If individuals are in roles that fit their skillset, recognized for their contribution and receive regular feedback, they are more likely to stay.¹⁵ All of these aspects can be addressed through the development of a fit-for-purpose Employee Value Proposition (EVP). Figure 6 outlines seven factors that institutions should consider to shape the EVP.

For people to feel engaged in their work, they want to feel like they have autonomy, are competent, and have the opportunity to work with others. Institutions can begin by developing an EVP that focuses on two attainable initial strategies:

1. **Expand professional development opportunities**
2. **Prioritize balance, well-being and productivity**

1. Expand professional development opportunities

During our consultations, leaders demonstrated that they understood the need for regular development to keep employees

engaged, enable growth and address underperformance. Research shows that employees who are encouraged to seek out development opportunities have higher productivity and greater job satisfaction, with 96 per cent of employees stating that they would stay longer if there was investment in development.¹⁶

The University of Alberta has outlined “enabling and empowering our people goals” as one key initiative in its People Strategy.¹⁷ It will accomplish this through increased access to and support for professional development and has established some of the following goals:

- Creating guidelines to improve succession planning and support long-term career growth
- Considering institution-wide recommended training programs for specific roles
- Developing and implementing a formal mentorship program
- Providing support for communities of practice in specific functional areas to aid specialization.

The University of Melbourne’s People Strategy 2023-2030 also outlines its approach to development. It says it will support managers and invest in opportunities that focus on building capabilities that support team, individual excellence and career growth.¹⁸



2. Prioritize balance, well-being and productivity

As in our own consultations, the Council of Independent Colleges has found that the top three reasons employees choose to work in institutions are work-life balance, workplace benefits, and a positive culture.¹⁹ Leading institutions are calling out the importance of well-being more deliberately. For example, the University of Iowa's EVP states that employee well-being is central to the university's strategic plan.²⁰ Therefore, it offers complimentary health and well-being services such as annual personal health assessments, access to confidential health coaches and discounted memberships for on campus recreational facilities. Further, some institutions are establishing CoEs responsible for EVP, aiming to enhance employee experience across the institution.

Institutions must find ways to create a positive work-life balance and flexibility to be competitive. The University of Alberta has also outlined the prioritization of health and well-being through managing workload as another key initiative in its People Strategy.

It has two initiatives to obtain this goal:

- **Create healthy and sustainable workloads through organizational and system level solutions** – It will tie healthy practices to performance reviews, linking recognition, performance and well-being as core leadership responsibilities.
- **Establish clear priorities to empower both individuals and teams to manage their workload in alignment with the university's mission** – It will renew the college, faculty and unit plans to set clear priorities ensuring the team and individual work plans align with priorities. This will allow teams to focus their efforts and not be overburdened with varying initiatives.

STRATEGY B

Embed talent and succession into institution ethos

During consultations, institutional leaders mentioned gaps in succession planning and talent management as a key issue, as well as the loss of institutional knowledge due to retirements or turnover. They acknowledged the need for knowledge transfer and the retention of corporate memory to be successful. This can be accomplished through talent management which is currently patchy in the Canadian context.



Formal succession planning and talent management is often challenging in a higher education environment due to various barriers, including lack of consistency or clarity in approaches, siloed communication, low prioritization and finite talent pools. Leadership promotion within academia typically focuses more on faculty members' teaching abilities rather than their leadership and management skills. The absence of long-term succession planning strategies and robust approaches to design these plans further complicates the issue, leaving individuals aspiring for leadership roles without a clear path for progression.²¹

Succession planning is crucial in higher education as it enhances the recruitment and retention practices for future leaders and ensures continuous institutional success and growth. Our consultations revealed that Canadian institutions understand the need for performance management to keep employees engaged, foster development and address underperformance but many don't know where to start to transform performance management practices.

Effective succession planning and talent management helps mitigate the loss of organizational knowledge due to leadership changes by incorporating mechanisms such as role modelling, and the identification and development of internal candidates with leadership competencies. They also foster opportunities for ongoing knowledge acquisition, sharing, and transfer, ensuring a seamless transition and sustained excellence in academic institutions. Below we outline the three mechanisms Canadian institutions can implement to enhance succession planning and talent management.

1. Implement simple talent identification practices

A good first step to implement succession planning approaches in any institution is talent identification. Implement a system to identify and track high-potential employees, document their skills, achievements and career aspirations. This creates a talent pipeline and ensures that potential successors are recognized and nurtured through development opportunities.

The University of Windsor launched a succession planning program to identify and develop high-potential individuals for critical roles.²² The program uses a framework of five core competencies and associated behaviours. For example, strategic focus includes anticipating risks and balancing short- and long-term priorities. Identified individuals receive tailored development plans that outline required skills, timelines and actions such as stretch assignments, secondments, acting roles and formal training or mentoring.

Another useful method is the development of a simple questionnaire for leaders to use at all levels, with questions such as "Who do your people look for on advice on [insert focus] matters?" This is a very effective and simple way to identify talent. The type of focus of that advice can be tailored to the specific faculty, function or team. When leaders are asked that question, there will be people that come to mind immediately, and those people are likely to be the ones who should be considered in the talent pool. It is key to consider potential, performance and readiness in the talent equation.

Effective succession planning and talent management helps mitigate the loss of organizational knowledge due to leadership changes by incorporating mechanisms such as role creation, modelling, and the identification and development of internal candidates with leadership competencies.

An active and up to date successor plan ensures that identified future leaders are not only named but also regularly engaged and developed.

2. Implement evidence-based performance management processes

To make talent and succession planning a core part of institutional culture, performance measurement and management foundations need to be in place. Institutions can start by using simple, evidence-based performance management processes. These processes help identify and support high-potential staff by tracking their progress, setting clear goals, and providing regular feedback. When done well, performance management creates a clear path for development and leadership growth. It also helps retain knowledge and prepare people for future roles. By making performance management a regular part of how institutions work, succession planning becomes more consistent and easier to maintain over time.

3. Provide opportunities for development

Once talent identification processes have been implemented, institutions can begin to provide opportunities to develop these individuals. Opportunities can include experiences like a job rotation program that focuses on rotating promising staff and faculty members through different roles and units to expand their experience and skills. The objective is to identify and develop leaders who can step into key positions when vacancies arise.

Institutions can also implement shadowing and mentorship programs. The idea is to pair potential successors with current leaders to learn about their roles and responsibilities. This facilitates knowledge transfer and prepares future leaders by providing them with insight into higher level roles. Some institutions have begun implementing mentorship programs. For example, the University of North Dakota has the Alice T. Clark Mentorship program aimed at assisting faculty in developing professional networks and supporting the professional development of faculty as teachers and scholars.²³ Similarly, the University of Texas has a Faculty Mentoring Hub that aims to foster a culture of faculty mentoring to support faculty at all stages to improve their work and motivate them to develop.²⁴

4. Create an active successor plan

Having an up-to-date and active successor plan is key to making succession planning effective. It ensures that identified future leaders are not only named but also regularly engaged and developed. These individuals should have ongoing access to learning opportunities like mentoring, training, and stretch assignments that build the skills needed for future roles. Regular check-ins and updates to their development plans keep them motivated and aligned with institutional needs. This active approach helps universities stay ready for leadership changes and supports a strong pipeline of capable, prepared individuals. For example, the University of Victoria has a succession toolkit that leaders can use to identify individuals for succession and the tools they need to get there.²⁵



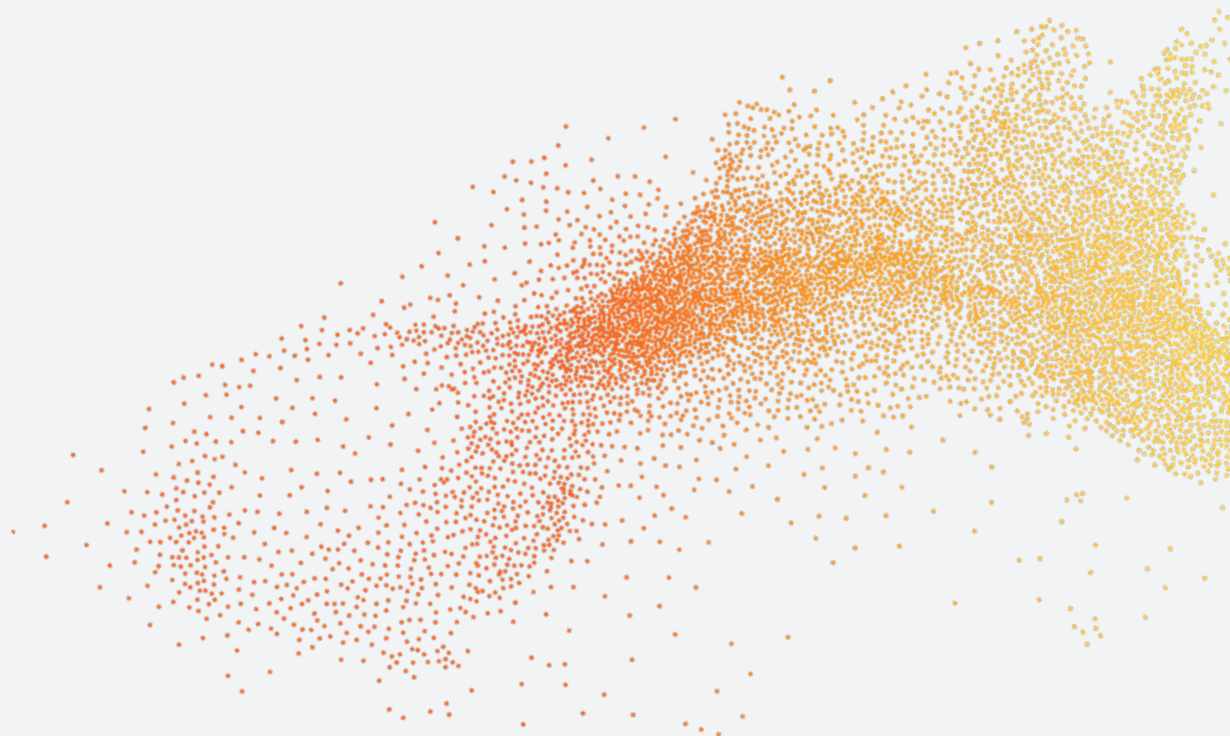
Conclusion

Canadian higher education institutions are navigating a period of profound change. Financial constraints, policy shifts, and evolving workforce expectations are challenging traditional models and demanding bold, strategic responses. Strengthening HR foundations is essential to support transformation by modernizing systems, clarifying roles and enabling HR to act as a strategic partner. Institutions must also invest in leadership and workforce capabilities to stay competitive. Equally important is creating a compelling employee experience. The path forward is not one-size-fits-all. Institutions must assess their current maturity, prioritize foundational improvements and adopt a thoughtful, staged approach to change. By doing so, they can unlock the full potential of their people, strengthen their competitive position and build a more sustainable and vibrant future for Canadian higher education.

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