

Examining Workplace Expectations and Skills Gaps of Prospective Employees and Employers

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Summary

This study explored student and employer perceptions of training needs for entry roles in the Supply Chain industry. The study focused on understanding the similarities and differences relating to the required level of knowledge, skills, and abilities of workers. Findings identified a preference for general competency training such as communication and collaboration over specific industry training. Furthermore, real world experience such as workplace integrated learning is the preferred form of upskilling, and professional designation pathways are the most understood form of external provider training. Finally, the research identified that the students and employers in this study had limited knowledge of micro-credentials.

Purpose of the Research

Research on the effectiveness of micro-credentials and other short-term training initiatives in Canada is limited. Articles in academic journals primarily focus on addressing issues in stakeholder engagement, frameworks, approaches, and curriculum and assessment issues. (For example, see: Gauthier, 2020; Healy, 2021; and Lester & Costley, 2010. Most papers identify the need for and design of credentials for skill development are in the form of reports or studies completed by governmental organizations and private educational providers (For example, see: Australian Government Department of Education, 2023; HESA & The Strategic Council, 2023; and Mahboubi, 2019). These reports are mainly prospective, suggesting that micro-credentials can

address important skills shortages in an increasingly digitized workplace. The documents identify gaps in the current higher educational ecosystem, particularly in areas of assessment and recognition. There is optimism that these issues will be addressed over the next few years.

The state of the literature provides considerable room for new examination of practical topics with academic rigor including the learning needs of specific industries, and gaps in key actors' understanding the value and role of micro-credentials in work preparation and development. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the differences and similarities between prospective employees and employers relating to workplace expectations and skills gaps that could be addressed through short cycle programs and changes to policy and practice.

The study focused on:

- Understanding the specific interests, expectations, and motivations of prospective and employers relating to employment,
- Comparing responses and identify differences and similarities between the two groups,
- Examining the real and perceived gaps relating to skill requirements in each of the groups,
- Exploring the relationship between employers and post-secondary institutions relating to expectations and assumptions about education and training, and
- Identifying the preferred forms of learning relating to skills development.

The supply chain industry was selected for examination as there are multiple programs offered at MacEwan University through the School of Business and the School of Continuing Education and employers have indicated a growing need for skilled employees. Therefore, this study served to provide insight on the knowledge, skills, and abilities requirements for entry level, supply chain management-focused positions, in Alberta-based organizations.

Methodology

In this exploratory study, qualitative interviews were used to gather insights from participants about their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives. The research team consisted of a principal investigator, co-investigators and student research assistants. The institution's research ethics board approved the composition and conduct of the study.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with knowledge of entry level roles in supply chain management. Participants represented different sectors important to the study. Fifteen interviews were conducted.

An interview guide and questions were developed based on the purpose of the study. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant; sessions were video, and audio recorded as per research ethics requirements. The coding framework was constructed based on the research objectives and research questions, allowing for the simple categorization of responses that had common or consistent responses.

Key Findings and Implications

Several themes emerged relating to preferences for training and professionalization of workers. Life experience and formal education were considered important foundations for work in the Supply Chain industry. Additional training and development were important for both employers and students.

The primary short-cycle training interest of both groups included communication, strategic thinking, organization skills, and collaboration. Participants indicated the expected source of required training is the employer. Private training providers were not frequently identified as sources for skills training.

The following three areas were identified by participants as important for career development:

- Work integrated learning
- Courses in communication, strategic thinking, organizational skills and collaboration
- Professional designations

Conclusion

Micro-credentials have the potential to provide flexible and cost-effective training to address specific skill requirements. While currently in a nascent stage there is hope that over time, issues such as national and international recognition, access, assessment, value proposition, and the roles of the stakeholders will be addressed. This research identifies limited understanding and support for micro-credentials in one specific industry within an urban centre in Alberta. Further research is needed relating to the value proposition of micro-credentials for both employers and

employees. Despite its current limitations, the promise of micro-credentials is strong based on the need for upskilling and reskilling in Canada.

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