

Memo: Reopening Canada's Economy

Background

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, governments across the country must better coordinate efforts to address new challenges facing Canadians. As we shift to recovery, this alignment is even more critical to ensure that society reopens in a coordinated fashion that prioritizes the safety of our citizens and the stability of our economy.

In this unprecedented time, national employers understand the imperative of local governments to design reopening approaches based on their local realities. These approaches also need to align with the common principles for restarting the Canadian economy that the federal government has jointly set out with provinces and territories. Major employers have identified critical elements that go beyond the immediate health system response to the crisis, which require alignment of governments across Canada to sustainably reopen the economy.



There are six critical elements to reopening: (i) PPE availability, (ii) smart quarantine policies, (iii) protection for the most vulnerable, (iv) mass testing, (v) contact tracing, and (vi) workforce management systems. With respect to the first three elements, provincial, territorial and federal governments are already actively collaborating to address these challenges.

Canada's major employers are asking that provincial and territorial governments coordinate their efforts on the latter elements, namely mass testing, contact tracing, and workforce management systems. Coordination of efforts can be streamlined through the active assistance of businesses collaboratively working to solve these three challenges, all equally critical to ensuring that subsequent waves of the virus are managed effectively and impacts are mitigated through targeted actions.

Three interrelated problems



The availability of **mass testing** is already an issue of particular concern according to a recent Canadian Medical Association survey of 2,500 physicians. The survey revealed that 84% cite lack of testing as a major pain point in the battle against COVID-19. This issue will be amplified, as efforts to restart the economy get underway and millions of additional person-to-person contacts re-emerge in daily life. Current testing focuses squarely on prioritizing and trying to meet health system needs under various states of lockdown. To reopen and then keep the economy open, we will need new testing capacity. To scale testing to the level required, we must first understand available capacity.

A lack of reliable information remains a critical issue in properly understanding barriers to ramp up testing, in particular limited data on available capacity. The absence of a single-source of truth, particularly with regard to lab diagnostic capacities, testing processing time, and testing supplies across Canadian jurisdictions, will undermine the effectiveness of reopening efforts. Currently, federal authorities estimate that Canada is only using just over one third of existing testing capacity, at slightly over 20,000 tests per day nationally. This is in part due to lack of information sharing across the country.

Contact tracing is inextricably linked to the testing issue. Absent a robust contact tracing programme, the ramping up of Canada's raw testing capacity will be muted in its effectiveness. The feedback loop enabled by digital contact tracing ensures that asymptomatic viral carriers are identified quickly and sent for testing; and that people who have come into contact with the carriers are alerted to proactively self-isolate. This process lowers the overall testing demand (and preserves available capacity), while breaking the train of transmission at a case-by-case level. Without effective tracing, a negative feedback loop will blunt much of the impact of mass testing. Canadians are overwhelmingly supportive of strict measures to combat COVID-19, with 65% saying they would even support the federal government using cellphone data to track people who are supposed to be self-isolating according to an Ipsos survey conducted in April. This and similar findings suggest that there is ample public support for contact tracing efforts that are voluntary, and reflect the core principles of privacy by design such as the programme underway in Alberta.

The third problem is **consistent workforce intervention**. Various labour ministries and other government health authorities, as well as industry groups, have provided standard guidance on appropriate measures to improve hygiene and cleaning best practices. As the country reopens in phases, many employers are also implementing additional, customized interventions that aim to keep their employees safe. Depending on the workplace, this may include increased physical distance between workstations, additional safety training, and even body temperature-screening protocols. However, much like the relationship between testing and contact tracing, these workforce interventions cannot occur in isolation, lest they are deemed ineffective by the lowest common denominator of safety.

Three critical solutions that require public / private cooperation

Scale Testing



In order to ensure confidence in testing on the scale needed to reopen the economy and keep it open, Canada requires a national data repository for shared COVID information. This integrated data solution is imperative in driving evidence-based approaches to COVID management challenges and to ultimately assist provincial and territorial governments in anticipating and solving bottlenecks related to testing efforts.

This central database will serve as the single source of truth for both testing capacity (including diagnostic lab capacity amongst private, provincial, research, and hospital labs), as well as critical testing supply chain resources (e.g., swabs, reagents, etc.), to ensure a coordinated national view available to all health system authorities.

It will be managed, tracked, and monitored by a neutral broker, to ensure competitors can work together without exposing critical competitive data.

Implement Contact Tracing



In the absence of a federal solution that meets the needs of provincial and territorial public health systems, the interoperability of all Canadian contact tracing solutions is critical to ensure that mass testing can be effective. These interoperable systems must incorporate global best practices, as is the case with the ABTraceTogether mobile solution in Alberta. The network effect of linking all provincial and territorial systems will ensure their effectiveness across provincial and territorial borders, at which there are currently no plans to conduct any additional health checks. Governments must also ensure that these efforts align with the key principles set out by Privacy Commissioners across the country pertaining to contact tracing, including voluntary consent, legal authority, proportionality, limitation of duration, accountability and safeguarding identities.

Further, this will allow robust forms of employee screening to be coordinated with central contact tracing systems (e.g., tracers of positive case to cross-reference with public transit, etc.), amplifying their effectiveness.

Implement Workforce Management Systems



Employers in Canada must adopt a scalable digital software tool for routine self-screening and assessment by employees, as part of a comprehensive workforce management system. These tools will need to be scaled appropriately and accessible to organizations of all sizes.

This comprehensive workforce management system will include a standard for mandatory pre-return-to-workplace safety training for employees, which like other training certifications are separate from employment performance records.

This tool will be used by employees, upon completion of the training, via mobile app to track and report symptoms, in order to enable proactive corrective measures such as alerts to self-isolate.

Evolving existing provincial and territorial workforce management plans, governments across Canada must outline a common set of standards for utilization of such a workforce management system, aligned to data standards that respect employee privacy and confidentiality, while also allowing the data to be appropriately integrated and shared with contact tracing programmes run by health systems / governments.