

May 12, 2020

Hon. Monte McNaughton
Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development
14th Flr, 400 University Ave
Toronto, ON M7A 1T7

RE: Retraining Ontario's workforce to recover from COVID-19

Dear Minister McNaughton,

Thank you for your government's continued leadership throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) is working closely with the business community and government to support a gradual and successful recovery.

The return to economic activity will require companies and employees to rapidly adjust to a new normal. Retraining and upskilling the workforce during this period will help businesses prepare for post-pandemic growth, which will demand new skills and exacerbate the skills gaps already present in Ontario's economy. Workforce training is especially important for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often lack the resources to develop internal training programs and have been profoundly impacted by the current crisis.

To address this challenge, the OCC's Workforce Development Council recommends the following:

- 1. Introduce a temporary program to support on-the-job workforce training.** The Quebec government recently implemented a \$100 million program to help companies train workers and continue paying those undergoing training. The Concerted Action Program for Maintaining Employment (*Programme d'actions concertées pour le maintien en employé* or PACME) covers a range of training purposes, including digital skills training, training recommended by professional orders, training necessary for the resumption of company activities, and training related to a strategy for adjusting company activities in the context of economic uncertainty related to COVID-19. Due to the ambiguity around what technical skills will be needed as the labour market demands continue to shift, an Ontario version of this program should be adapted to include core universal skills such as communication, critical thinking, business acumen and financial literacy.
- 2. Support reskilling of unemployed and underemployed Ontarians.** Economic recovery will require a rapid return to work for many Ontarians. Given the urgency, provincial and federal funds could be flowed through Employment Ontario to support short-term micro-credential programs that meet local and sectoral needs. Employment Ontario has specific, pre-existing programs at its disposal which could be helpful, such as Second Career, which is designed for displaced workers and delivered by public and private colleges. Colleges have many Program Advisory Committees composed of employers that could help identify relevant skills.

- 3. Re-establish the Strategic Skills Initiative.** As [highlighted in a recent OCC report](#), the Strategic Skills Initiative was a former Ontario program that cost-effectively leveraged partnerships between industry and training providers to accelerate skills development. We recommend investing \$50 million over three years to implement a modernized version of the initiative. Funding would be funneled towards projects that train students in skills needed to adapt to technological change experienced by SMEs, such as data science, with a focus on work-integrated learning. Eligible applicants would be post-secondary institutions with evidence of strong partnerships and involvement with SMEs, and program funding would primarily be used to procure enabling equipment, such as software, virtual reality tools, simulators, and upgrades to existing facilities. The program could be targeted strategically towards specific communities and sectors to align with broader economic recovery objectives.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these proposals further. The OCC will continue to monitor and assess new developments pertaining to COVID-19 and work with our members, partners, and all levels of government to support Ontario business.

Sincerely,



Rocco Rossi
President and CEO
Ontario Chamber of Commerce