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QUESTIONS POSED BY THE COMMITTEE

- 01** What federal measures would help Canadians generally – and such specific groups as the unemployed, Indigenous peoples, those with a disability and seniors – maximize, in the manner of their choosing, their contributions to the country's economic growth?
- 02** What federal actions would assist Canada's businesses – in all regions and sectors – meet their expansion, innovation and prosperity goals, and thereby contribute to economic growth in the country?
- 03** What federal measures would ensure that urban, rural and remote communities throughout Canada enable residents to make their desired contribution to the country's economic growth and businesses to expand, prosper and serve domestic and international customers in order to contribute to growth?

RESPONSE

Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am the Director of the Centre for Human Capital Policy Research at the Canada West Foundation – a non-partisan think tank, based in Calgary. Given the time constraints, this submission is aimed primarily at question number two, although my comments are relevant to the others.

Safety, quality, productivity and cost. Whether an employer wants to expand, to innovate or just meet its current goals, all of these depend on the quality of their workforce. And that quality depends on how competent their people are to do their jobs.

We have been engaged in a fascinating case study involving an firm, the Ironworkers Union and their focus on competencies – as distinct from credentials.

As you will hear, the results are striking.

On the whole, employers in Canada have accepted credentials to be a proxy for competence. They shouldn't. We have all heard stories about the incompetence of highly credentialed people. And while we would never say that credentials do not mean anything – we can say that they do not guarantee competence.

Knowing something is not the same as understanding it. Knowing theoretically how something should be done, does not mean that you can do it. And knowing how to do something under normal conditions does not mean that you can do it when things have changed. And, things change all the time. Knowing, doing, and being able to adapt how you do a task according to the circumstances – this is competence.

Competence can be built, and it can be assessed. And Canada's workplaces would be safer, produce more quality products and services and be more productive if we switched to educating, training, assessing and deploying people on the basis of competencies.

So, what do I mean by competencies? Think of Lego. Standardized, modular, stackable competencies are the knowledge, skills, and attributes required to perform the tasks of each job. They become the building blocks of a career. Competency profiles show a worker which competencies they need to perform their current job, or do it better. And a competency framework is the pathway between jobs and occupations.

This is not just theory.

I am working with a steel fabricator in Alberta and the Ironworkers Union that represents its workforce. Just over four years ago, one of their workers was almost killed on the job and they decided that it would never happen again. Since then, they have moved towards assessing and training for competencies in their workforce.

When someone is assessed by their foreman to be not competent to do a particular task, he or she is not assigned to be responsible for it. An assessment of Needs Training in a particular competency, is a signal that the company and the union will invest in training. Formal training is offered, or a coach or mentor is assigned to help workers increase their competence.

The results speak volumes. They are working more safely - they now have had four million hours of loss-free time on their jobsites. The company had never exceeded half a million hours before. They also are hiring throughout the downturn in Alberta and just had their second best year ever – in a recession. And they did this with the full cooperation of their union.

This company's experience does not have to be a one off. Canada is well behind other countries in using competencies. We can and should move more quickly to encourage more businesses to hire, train, assess and deploy their workforce on the basis of competencies. It is the norm in many countries. We need it to become the norm here if we are to be competitive in the global economy.

While education is a provincial responsibility, the federal government invests hundreds of millions of dollars per year in workplace training through the Canada Job Grant and other Labour Market Development funds. Reporting for these programs is more about outputs than outcomes. Certificates earned – are assumed to be proxies for the learning achieved.

This government should require that these federally funded training programs report on the competencies actually gained by participants in the programs, not the number of certificates earned. Employers benefiting from these programs could be encouraged to recruit on the basis of competencies – rather than assuming that someone who has earned a certificate is actually competent to do the job for which they are hiring.

If the federal government does this, individuals, businesses and communities will meet their goals and better contribute to the economic success of the country.