

# **BUILDING ECONOMIC STRENGTH THROUGH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

A Case Study of the Western  
Ontario Wardens' Caucus  
Workforce Development  
Strategy

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# Background

Workforce development is a critical challenge confronting rural economies throughout Ontario. In 2024, an online survey was distributed to all Community Future Development Corporations and Workforce Planning Boards throughout Ontario to better understand rural workforce development trends. The results from the survey can be found in two reports: [Findings from Community Futures Development Corporations](#) and [Findings from Workforce Planning Boards](#). As part of the survey, participants identified innovative rural workforce development initiatives.

This report is a case study of one of the innovations identified. The case study identifies the innovative approaches, goals of the initiative, successes, and transferability to other rural communities. This report is part of a series of rural innovative workforce initiatives as part of the Addressing Labour Shortages through Newcomer Attraction initiative. Further case studies and additional information on the research initiatives can be found at <https://ruraldev.ca/lсна/>.

## Introduction

The [Western Ontario Workforce Strategy](#) (WOWS) was developed with assistance from the Ontario Labour Market Partnership Project, which provided funding to the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus (WOWC). Both, the provincial and federal governments contribute to the funding of Ontario Labour Market Partnerships. The non-profit [Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus](#) represents 15 upper tier and single tier municipalities in southwestern Ontario, including those in Brant, Bruce, Chatham-Kent, Dufferin, Elgin, Essex, Grey, Huron, Lambton, Middlesex, Norfolk, Oxford, Perth, Simcoe, and Wellington counties (Murray et al., 2022) (Figure 1). Western Ontario Wardens Caucus advocates for and engages with the region's 300 rural and small urban communities with approximately three million residents, to enhance their prosperity and overall well-being (WOWC, 2023).

In addition to providing affordable housing options that meet the needs of the local workforce, the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy seeks to address workforce attraction and retention by leveraging the current population. The strategy aims to support member municipalities in addressing the demands of expanding industries and the local labour shortage. It also places a strong emphasis on attracting and retaining workers, encouraging immigration, creating a welcoming environment for newcomers, and bolstering employer-led efforts to recruit and retain employees (The WOWC Releases a Blueprint for Building Economic Strength, 2022).



Figure 1. Map of WOWC region (WOWC, 2023b)

## Methodologies and Strategic Approach

The WOWC Workforce Strategy involves three stages of completion.

**Phase 1** is a background study which provides an overview of earlier regional initiatives and prior county workforce strategies. It includes several case studies on local workforce strategies from around the world that could serve as templates for WOWC.

**Phase 2** involves the following elements:

1. *Stakeholder engagement*: an overview of methods used in stakeholder engagement and the knowledge gathered from extensive community participation (Williams et al., 2020).
2. *Achievable housing*: a thorough examination of the supply and demand for housing by WOWC jurisdiction, as well as case studies of similar initiatives (*Affordable and Attainable Housing* | WOWC, 2022).
3. *Labor market and talent attraction*: a thorough examination of the economic and demographic trends and projections that influence the need for workers, as well as an assessment of the region's ongoing initiatives to draw in newcomers and talent.
4. *Marketing and communications*: an analysis of local companies' marketing strategies that the WOWC may apply to bolster its workforce plan.

**Phase 3** serves as a guide for WOWC initiatives. It culminates the strategic planning process. It includes the strategy's vision, mission, goals, objectives and practical steps which are all based on strategic priorities.

The strategy takes a comprehensive and team-based approach to addressing workforce development needs throughout the WOWC region (Murray et al., 2022).

## Goals of the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy

The workforce development strategy 2022 aims to improve the general well-being and economic status of small urban and rural communities throughout the region (Murray et al., 2022). Its main goals are:

1. **Attraction and Retention of Workforce:** Combines efforts to draw in residents and workers to the region. The new talent can come from within or outside the WOWC region, may include senior workers as well as underrepresented groups in the labor market.
2. **Making the Most of the Current Population:** Providing postsecondary education that is in line with industry demands, introducing young people to career options, and helping those who are facing employment obstacles.
3. **Achievable Housing:** Supplying creative and appealing housing options to satisfy local and newcomers' demands (City of Belleville, 2023).
4. **Employer Recruitment and Retention:** Assisting local employers in their human resources, recruitment, and retention initiatives.

The strategy's goal is to connect post-secondary education with industry needs, support individuals who encounter barriers to employment, and expose youth to career opportunities. The primary goal is to ensure that the region can work with businesses, colleges, universities, the government, and the housing development industry to ensure that it can continue to meet the future demands for skilled workers (Murray et al., 2022). The objectives are:

1. To improve the quality and accessibility of labour market intelligence to better meet business needs, and to establish avenues for improving the alignment of business needs with educational initiatives.
2. To assist with succession planning and business retention initiatives for municipalities.
3. To increase the area's access to a talented and skilled labour pool.

## The Actors Involved

The actors involved in this initiative include WOWC, senior government partners [at both federal and provincial level](#), industry associations, the education sector, and other stakeholders are among the many parties involved in the Western Ontario Workforce

Strategy. The WOWC strategy document stresses the value of cooperation and teamwork in addressing the region's workforce development needs by outlining precise roles and responsibilities for each partner. It also emphasises how small businesses, housing development companies, universities, and colleges can help with workforce development, retention, and recruitment (Murray et al., 2022). WOWC, the lead partner, oversees organising and fostering partnerships to drive implementation of its plan, with an emphasis on bringing people together and promoting workforce development.

## **Target Audience of the Initiative**

Member municipalities, colleges and universities, employers (large and small), the development sector, and other stakeholders involved in workforce development, retention, and recruitment are encouraged to participate in the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy initiative, designed to be executed within 2021 – 2030 timeframe. The program also aims to include immigrants, young people, locals, and people who are having difficulty finding work. The plan also emphasises how important it is to collaborate with industry-specific workforce groups, such as recent immigrants who are highly motivated and skilled, temporary foreign workers, and individuals with foreign training (Murray et al., 2022).

## **The Geography of the Initiative**

The WOWC region, whose member municipalities are dedicated to working together on workforce development initiatives, is included in the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy initiative. The initiative is only open to the specific towns and areas that fall under the WOWC region, which includes all Western Ontario. In total, there are 300 communities and approximately three million residents in the WOWC study area (WOWC, 2023).

## **Funding Sources**

The initiative is partially funded by the governments of Ontario and Canada. WOWC may also use funds from other sources in addition to allocating its own resources to assist with the workforce development strategy's implementation. Although there are no explicit details on additional funding sources in the document, it is evident that both federal and provincial governments support the initiative.

The Ontario Labour Market Partnership Project provided funding to WOWC to aid in the creation of the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy. Part of the funding for Ontario Labour Market Partnerships comes from both the Ontario and federal governments.

# Innovative Approach to Addressing Labour Shortages

The Western Ontario Workforce Strategy initiative is innovative because it addresses workforce development needs throughout the WOWC region through a comprehensive and team-based approach. Using a practical blueprint with measurable outcomes, the initiative emphasises the importance of positive collaboration between WOWC members and senior government partners. It centres on various innovative strategies, such as optimising the current population by aligning postsecondary education with industry needs, assisting those who encounter employment barriers, and providing reasonably priced housing options to meet the needs of both residents and newcomers (Murray et al., 2022).

The [consulting team's Background Discussion Report](#) (WOWC, Background Discussion Report, 2021) provides a thorough analysis of background information, studies, and media coverage on workforce development for the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus. The aim of the report is to gain a better understanding of the current trends in workforce development, as well as potential future challenges and opportunities that must be considered while developing the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy.

Industry consultation involving over 250 community partners and key informants, Workforce Planning West, a coalition of nine workforce planning boards in Southwestern Ontario, released their [Workforce Planning West Scenario Planning Report](#) along with nine local scenario planning reports with support from project partners Libro Credit Union, Ontario Tourism Innovation Lab, and Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus which are a typical examples of previous workforce strategies (Falconer, 2021).

## Success in Achieving Goals

Each member municipality within the WOWC region has assets, features, and benefits, that set them apart from their neighbours. These are important differentiators that can assist in individual marketing efforts. From a high-level view, an understanding of the individual target audiences (personas) identified within the report, provides an insight to what motivates these target audiences to remain in the WOWC region or consider moving to the region.

The Findings and Issues Report by Western Ontario Warden Caucus' Workforce Strategy Consulting Team, provides a review of various resources that other regional organizations have used successfully on behalf of their membership. These resources include [customizable toolkits](#), regional data delivery through [website](#) and other digital tools, community profiles, promotional campaigns, and [self-administered assessment checklists](#). The advantage of this approach is that marketing can be incredibly targeted, personalised to an individual.

In WOWC's case, the region as a whole or each member municipality can share their findings and insights leveraging strength in numbers to reach successful outcomes. However, each member municipality is at a different place in their development (Murray et al., 2022).

## Achievements

Through its investigation, the consulting team has located several noteworthy case studies that offer extra insight and useful solutions. The goal of attracting new residents has been to attract talent for the workforce through numerous counties or local municipalities.

### **Case Study: Work in Simcoe County: Simcoe County**

Work in Simcoe County is an extensive online resource aimed at potential employees who are thinking about finding a job in Barrie, Orillia, or Simcoe County. A searchable job board with filters for occupation, job types, skill levels, duration, and community is available on the website (<https://workinsimcoecounty.ca/>).

### **Case Study: YMCA “WE Value Partnership” Newcomers Program: Windsor-Essex**

The primary goal of the [WE Value Partnership Newcomer Program](#) is to assist newcomers. The approach is based on engaging with participants to learn more about them outside of a standardised assessment. Beyond just basic skills, information is gathered on job histories, educational backgrounds, occupation code equivalency and skill sets. The goal is to concentrate on matching opportunities with workers (YMCA of Southwestern Ontario, 2023).

## Challenges Encountered

The member municipalities of the WOWC region face several difficulties, which have been identified by the Western Ontario Workforce Strategy initiative. Each member municipality is at a different phase of development in market readiness, budgetary restraints, and/or asset inventories (Murray et al., 2022). The main challenges are:

1. How to attract more immigrants, educate young people, and deal with issues related to workforce attraction and retention, while recognising that to meet the demands of the growing industry and the need for local workforce replacement, support, resources, and connections must be made.
2. How to optimise and modernise recruitment, retention, and human resources practices by employers



3. How to make the neighbourhood hospitable for newcomers and assist those who face obstacles in finding work, like those who are nearing retirement age or those with disabilities.
4. How to communicate industry-specific attraction, support worker attraction and retention, immigrant needs, and foster a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers.
5. How to offer affordable housing options.

## Conclusion

The WOWC strategy seeks to improve member municipalities' cooperation to boost workforce recruitment and retention, foster a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers, and assist small businesses in their recruitment and retention efforts. Along with addressing workforce demand, the strategy highlights the significance of cooperation between universities, colleges, industry, government, and the housing development sector to promote the WOWC region and draw in workers from both within and outside of Canada. All things considered, the initiative's innovative quality resides in its multifarious and cooperative approach to workforce development, which addresses a wide range of industries with quantifiable results to guarantee the area can meet future labour demands.

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