

**Niagara Networks & Industry Collaborative**  
**Facilitated Discussion Summary**

**Hosted by**



**May 7, 2025**

Report by



**workforce**  
COLLECTIVE

## EVENT CONTEXT

On May 7, 2025, the South Niagara Chambers of Commerce convened organizations representing a wide range of industry stakeholders – from businesses and employers to educators and economic developers. This event gave attendees an opportunity to dive into labour market topics and identify challenges and opportunities. Alongside networking activities and a panel discussion, attendees took part in facilitated discussions focused on

- generational gaps: succession strategies, gen z insights, and evolving consumer behaviour
- navigating challenges and opportunities in the digital world: AI, cybersecurity, and the future of online platforms
- strategic diversification amid economic uncertainty
- trade: remaining resilient and prepared

## Generational Workforce Shifts

This session focused on strengths and challenges of multi-generational teams, strategies to recruit and retain Gen Z talent, generational differences in perception of leadership and career progression, and how the Chamber of Commerce can support businesses in this area.

### Key Insights

- Discussion highlighted generational differences in work-life balance: Gen Z values meaningful work, flexibility, and clear advancement—but faces affordability challenges. Older generations often prioritize loyalty, stability, and work. The group emphasized the need for nuance and recognized individual differences in generations.
- Misunderstandings, particularly around communication, professionalism, workplace dress/expectations, and social skills, are challenges in intergenerational teams.
- There was a call to integrate Gen Z into leadership opportunities through mentorship, skill-building roles, and early workplace exposure.
- Managing Gen Z requires adapting to their preferences around feedback, promotion timelines, and mental well-being to support retention.

### Proposed actions

- Include individuals from Gen Z into strategic workforce plans through workforce succession planning, and provide early leadership opportunities (e.g., team lead roles) and mentorship so relevant skills are already there when opportunities arise.
- Tailor leadership approaches rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model.
- Reach youth earlier through bridging gaps between education and industry by implementing real-world exposure (e.g., work-integrated learning, co-ops).
- Create workplace cultures that align with similar values (e.g., flexibility, trust-based management, relationship building, and a focus on deliverables).
- Promote mutual understanding of work ethic, expectations, and accountability.

## Navigating Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital World

These discussions highlighted how AI is transforming the way we work, key challenges, balancing technological advances with cybersecurity, and the future of digital/tech skills in the workplace.

### Key Insights

- AI has benefits and risks; it can increase efficiency (e.g., draft emails, translation, act as an “answer repository” for questions, note taking, etc.) but there are concerns around misuse of the tools or replacement of jobs.
- Some businesses see increased customer requests due to AI “representatives,” leading to greater demand for in-person staff
- It is a tool that needs consistent input to ensure it suits business needs; however, it still requires verification of answers and information.
- Generational perspectives differ, with Gen Z seeing AI as tools to reduce their workload while older generations view it as a tool to increase productivity.
- Like last year, conversation highlighted concerns over data misuse, open-source AI risks vs secured AI, accuracy of AI tools, and compliance with regulatory frameworks.

### Proposed actions

- There’s a need for stronger emphasis on teaching critical thinking, privacy awareness, ethical use, and clear AI policies.

## Strategic Diversification Amid Economic Uncertainty & Trade: Remaining Resilient and Prepared

The *Strategic Diversification* session focused on opportunities for strategic diversification, particularly given the current economic and political dynamics between Canada and the U.S. discussion also focused on how domestic innovation could be strengthened.

The *Trade: Remaining Resilient and Prepared* session focused on strategies local businesses can use to insulate themselves from shifts in cross-border trade/economic conditions, regional collaboration, how Niagara can leverage its location to strengthen trade and innovation and balancing long-term trade strategy with operational demands. Many of the themes in these two discussions overlapped and are presented here.

### Key Insights

- There was repeated emphasis on Niagara's U.S. market dependence but acknowledged the value of maintaining US partnerships and relationships.
- Diversification was highlighted as important, but individuals indicated that diversification takes effort; small businesses often lack capacity to engage in this type

of planning. They may also experience other barriers like confidence gaps to risk-taking or expansion, or insufficient or inaccessible support.

- There needs to be a mindset shift from reacting to economic crises to proactive planning (e.g., quarterly strategic check-ins, scenario planning, regional collaboration, diversifying trade routes and partners, examining lessons learnt from prior crises, etc.) and leveraging the networks businesses are in.
- Trade policy limitations in Canada and interprovincial trade barriers are hurdles to diversification, and infrastructure gaps, housing crises, and policy misalignment slow down innovation and scaling.
  - Additional economic challenges like real estate slowdowns were highlighted; while this may be tied to perception and affordability and not necessarily tariffs, discussion proposed solutions like prefabricated housing, addressing red tape, and building smaller units.
- Funding access from federal/provincial governments is described as overly complex and less supportive than comparable systems (e.g., Denmark, China).

### **Proposed actions**

- Individuals indicated the importance of diversifying international and east-west trade and ensuring supply chains are more redundant.
- There is a need to shift focus to achievable actions by identifying key issues, reducing fear of the unknown, and using challenges as an opportunity for business innovation.
- Participants called for a "one-stop shop" or "concierge service" that can support SMEs. This needs to include reliable and up-to-date data to inform planning and strategies.
- There was also a call for B2B learning, collaboration, education, and mentorship particularly for SMEs that lack time, resources, and experience.

### **Strategic Takeaways**

- Foster mutual understanding and flexible leadership models tailored to Gen Z's strengths and needs.
- Focus on soft skill training, realistic job pathways, and meaningful opportunities for young and emerging workers.
- Invest in policies, digital literacy, and ethical AI use frameworks that empower but regulate use.
- Support local advisory hubs, export mentorship, and cross-sector collaboration to guide SMEs beyond traditional markets.
- Encourage regular reflection, innovation, and mindset shifts to prepare for future crises and avoid reactive responses.
- The role of regional groups is to support, advocate, and transfer knowledge

*Note: Initial themes were compiled using AI and refined and verified by Workforce Collective through manual review of session notes.*