

Learning Brief

Scaling Pathways to Sustainable Careers: NPower Canada's Learning Journey

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Founded in Toronto in 2014—and now operating in six provinces—NPower Canada provides free, short-term training to prepare individuals who face barriers to employment for in-demand tech and digital roles. The program combines technical instruction and certification with professional development, career coaching, employment placement, and post-graduate support.

For jobseekers, it is a launchpad into sustainable careers. For employers, it is a reliable source of diverse, job-ready talent.

Over the past 11 years, NPower Canada has scaled with intention, ensuring local labour market alignment, strong community partnerships, and consistent program delivery quality. But as the organization expanded, so did its need to demonstrate impact. Anecdotal success stories and promising outcomes were no longer sufficient. The next step was to build causal evidence—a commitment to accountability and learning- that became more urgent as the organization expanded, and expectations for results increased across the workforce development sector.

This brief describes how NPower Canada in partnership with Future Skill Centre, set out to build a stronger evidence base for its work and answer two central questions: are we helping people in the way we intend to, and, if so, how do we know that outcomes are the result of the program itself?

Demonstrating impact through a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)

In partnership with Blueprint, NPower Canada launched a **randomized controlled trial**, or **RCT**, to evaluate the effectiveness of its model. RCTs are widely considered the gold standard in program evaluation.

Why RCTs? It is difficult to understand an intervention's effectiveness by examining its outcomes only—such outcomes can be driven by non-program-related factors, including individual disposition, population-specific factors, and broader societal trends. In an RCT, however, individuals are randomly assigned to a 'program group' (where they receive the intervention) or a 'comparison group' (where they proceed with 'business-as-usual' services). Participants are drawn from a similar population, so random assignment should lead to groups with similar demographic characteristics. This similarity means that differences observed in outcomes should be attributable to participation in the program—the sole element that distinguishes each group. Comparing the difference between program and comparison groups via an RCT is widely considered the most credible way to assess a program's causal impact.

How Rigorous Evidence Fuels Scale and Success. RCTs play a critical role in identifying workforce interventions that deliver real, measurable impact—building the case for broader investment. For example, an RCT of Per Scholas, a U.S. nonprofit that provides free IT training to low-income adults, found that participants earned 32% more over three years compared to a control group that did not receive the training. This strong causal evidence helped propel Per Scholas' expansion across multiple U.S. cities and integration into public workforce funding streams, illustrating how rigorous evaluation can support the scaling of effective models.

Why now? RCT evaluations are rare in the Canadian workforce development space, but increasingly necessary. As policymakers and funders look to make impactful, cost-effective investments—to improve public trust and ensure accountability to taxpayers—they need confidence that programs deliver tangible, lasting results. Undertaking an RCT positions NPower Canada, and the broader sector, to lead on evidence-based rigour as the organization was the first workforce development organization in the country to do this work. NPower Canada has already demonstrated proof of concept and positive post-program outcomes: participants consistently rate the program highly, and early employment outcomes point to strong potential. The next step is to establish that these positive results are truly attributable to the program itself rather than other factors, and to demonstrate how NPower Canada can deliver a measurable return on investment.

Designing for integrity: Balancing mission and method

Social programs must do more than serve—they must demonstrate that they are truly making a difference. Conducting an RCT can ensure that clients—those facing systemic barriers, and those investing their time and trust in the program—are genuinely benefiting from a program. This makes an RCT a mission-aligned opportunity for many community nonprofits.

Nevertheless, sorting eligible applicants into a comparison group that would not receive NPower Canada's services raised some questions from program stakeholders about the impact on, and fairness for, at-risk people if denied access to the program as well as reputational risk for the organization. To address this tension, NPower Canada and Blueprint co-designed a study that remained both credible and aligned with NPower Canada's values.

- **Strengthening internal evaluation and research skills.** NPower Canada front line staff were provided training and resources to feel prepared in responding to questions or concerns, and providing information to applicants on the RCT. Also, the staffs' research and evaluation skills were strengthened by delivering the RCT in partnership with Blueprint. As well, Blueprint continues to share resources and provide valuable tools to support ongoing internal evaluation.
- **Region selection was guided by historical demand.** The RCT was implemented in regions only where more eligible applicants consistently applied than there were program seats available. This meant that, with or without the trial, some applicants would not have been admitted to the program.
- **Engaging research participants.** Adaptations were made at several time points to increase research participation. Focus groups were held to better understand what would motivate participants to engage with the research, and the feedback shared helped shape communication strategies, emphasizing incentives and the study's value, which did result in improved participation. When research recruitment numbers needed to be further increased, a change in approach to asking applicants to agree to participate in the research was implemented, ensuring sample targets were met without extending the research timeline.
- **The comparison group is only as large as it needs to be.** The comparison group was kept to approximately 20% of applicants. This reflected the typical number of individuals who would not have received a spot in the program under normal circumstances.

- **Open communication with leadership to align on critical design decisions.** Ongoing communications emphasized the importance of preventing comparison group members from reapplying for two –years, to be able to compare longer term outcomes, and maintain the study’s validity .
- **Risks to Community and Referral Partner Relationships.** Community partners were informed of the research and how it would affect the clients they referred to NPC. Some community partners were concerned about their clients in need of the NPower Canada program being referred to the comparison group. Through one-on-one meetings and sharing estimates that, overall, a very small percentage of their clients would be randomized to the comparison group, their concerns were reduced.
- **Framing the RCT as a learning tool rather than a barrier.** Communicating around the RCT in this fashion helped the NPower Canada team agree on its value. By generating robust evidence, NPower Canada would be in a stronger position to influence policy and secure support for future program expansion.
- **Humanizing the research.** NPower Canada wanted to affirm that participants were not merely data points, but partners in a shared journey. To ensure this, the team pilot-tested consent forms and surveys to maximize accessibility and clarity. Also, transparency was ensured by communicating with applicants early and often throughout the application process to explain what the research involved, how it affected applicants, as well as its value for NPower Canada and participants. They also held focus groups with participants to better understand what would motivate them to engage with the research, and how best to explain the role of the comparison group. Participant feedback helped shape communication strategies, emphasizing incentives, transparency, and the study’s value.
- **Understanding the bigger picture.** The research also strives to understand the lived experiences of a diversity of participants, ensuring underserved populations were represented. Analyzing this data will be particularly valuable to understand if any changes could be implemented to the program to better serve participants.
- **Ensuring program access to under-served groups.** To avoid creating an additional barrier to program access for applicants who face greater challenges accessing training and employment, some underserved groups were not included in the randomization. Eligible Indigenous applicants and those receiving government disability benefits were instead offered enrollment to the program without risk of being randomized to the comparison group.

Blueprint’s role as a learning partner

Throughout, Blueprint has served not only as an evaluator, but also as a strategic learning partner. The collaboration extends beyond research design to include real-time advisory support, knowledge translation, and learning integration. Together, Blueprint and NPower Canada, with the support of **The Future Skills Centre** have navigated the complexities of rigorous evaluation within a values-driven environment. These partnerships exemplify a new model for evidence-building: one that is embedded, responsive, and focused on generating insights that inform both programs and systems.

Looking ahead

As the RCT continues, NPower Canada is poised to generate some of the most rigorous evidence available on workforce development programs in Canada. These findings will help answer important questions:

- Can workforce development programs truly move the needle on employment and earnings?
- How do wraparound supports contribute to long-term success?
- What design elements are essential for impact?

More broadly, the evaluation will provide valuable guidance to policymakers and funders about what works, and for whom, in creating pathways to decent work. It serves as a model for how mission-driven organizations can lead on both service and evidence, reminding us that the most impactful solutions emerge when mission-driven organizations and evidence partners collaborate to learn, adapt, and lead with integrity.

As we look ahead, NPower Canada's experience offers a roadmap for how we can scale impact—and not just programs—by putting evidence and equity at the centre of what we do.

About NPower Canada

NPower Canada is a charitable organization that launches underserved youth and adults, including people with disabilities, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), women, 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, Indigenous peoples, and newcomers, into meaningful and sustainable careers in technology. Through its free in-demand digital and professional skills training programs, NPower Canada connects jobseekers to employers looking for digital talent.

To date, more than 80% of NPower Canada's 11,000+ alumni have secured in-demand tech jobs such as Help Desk Analyst, QA Specialist, and Information Security Analyst with industry leaders including Accenture, CGI, CIBC, Cisco, Deloitte, IBM, RBC, Softchoice, TD, and TELUS.

About Blueprint

[Blueprint](#) was founded on the simple idea that evidence is a powerful tool for change. We work with policymakers and practitioners to create and use evidence to solve complex policy and program challenges. Our vision is a social policy ecosystem where evidence is used to improve lives, build better systems and policies and drive social change.

Our team brings together a multidisciplinary group of professionals with diverse capabilities in policy research, data analysis, design, evaluation, implementation and knowledge mobilization.

As a consortium partner of the Future Skills Centre, Blueprint works with partners and stakeholders to collaboratively generate and use evidence to help solve pressing future skills challenges

About Future Skills Centre

The [Future Skills Centre \(FSC\)](#) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We are funded by the Government of Canada's [Future Skills Program](#).

Le [Centre des Compétences futures \(CCF\)](#) est un centre de recherche et de collaboration avant-gardiste qui se consacre à l'innovation dans le domaine du développement des compétences afin que toutes les personnes au Canada soient prêtes pour l'avenir du travail. Nous sommes financés par le Programme des [compétences futures du gouvernement du Canada](#).

Empowering Pathways to Digital Employment for Equity-Seeking Groups: National Scaling Insights and Impact from NPower Canada's Workforce Development and RCT Findings is funded by the Government of Canada's [Future Skills Program](#).