Mentoring as a Catalyst for Youth Employment

Sensemaking Insights Summary

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Mentor Canada, in partnership with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and the Students Commission of Canada (SCC), is leading a three-year initiative, *Mentoring as a Catalyst for Youth Employment*, funded by the Government of Canada's Youth Employment Skills Strategy. The project leverages Sensemaking to build the capacity of the youth employment ecosystem, accelerating the adoption and integration of high-quality mentoring practices and mentorship opportunities. This approach positions them as a means of improving employment outcomes for youth across Canada.

CHÔRA Canada's Portfolio Sensemaking process is a structured, facilitated, group activity designed to gather insights and generate meaning from experience. For Mentor Canada, this process offered a way to explore systemic issues in youth mentoring and employment, connect various existing approaches, and identify insights that inform the Quality Mentoring Framework and broader sector strategies.

In 2025 – Year 1 of the project – two workshop series were conducted:

- Workshop 1 in August generated evidence to inform the development of tools and resources for quality mentoring for youth aged 18-30.
- Workshop 2 in September explored barriers to mentorship access and identified solutions for integrating mentoring across the employment ecosystem for youth aged 18-30.

During each round, a diverse group of participants from the youth employment and mentoring ecosystem shared their experiences. The facilitated conversation focused on the rationale, activities, and outcomes, as well as the key challenges related to their portfolio of mentoring initiatives. The process concluded with an intelligence generation session where a smaller team reflected on the insights and evidence to draw implications for the framework and broader project activities. The resulting themes were articulated as insights and propositions to guide the project's next steps.

This report consolidates ten key insights generated during the two Sensemaking workshops, highlighting the significant potential of mentoring as a catalyst for youth employment success. The findings emphasize that all stakeholders within the youth employment ecosystem have a critical role in facilitating the adoption and integration of mentoring promising practices, ensuring that young people receive the support they need to develop their potential and navigate their career pathways effectively. This summary organizes the insights by the ecosystem actors responsible for addressing them: systems-level actors (funders and policymakers), organizational and institutional actors (leaders at youth organizations, post-secondary institutions, and employers), interpersonal actors (practitioners, supervisors, and mentors), and individual actors (focusing on the youth's own assets and strengths that foster their trust and buy-in for mentoring).

For quick reference:
Systems-level actors can focus on Insights 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10;
Organizational and institutional actors can focus on Insights 3, 4, 4a, 5, 6, 6a, 7, 9, 10;
Interpersonal actors can focus on Insights 4b, 5, 6, 6a, 7, 7a, 7b, 8, 9, 10; and
Individuals can focus on Insights 4b, 5, 6a, 7, 7a, 7b, 8, 9, 10.

Insight 1
A multilevel, systems approach is essential for quality mentoring

Achieving quality and sustainable mentoring requires a comprehensive, multilevel approach that considers the needs, motivations, and constraints of all actors within the mentoring community. This is critical to cultivate a true "mentoring mindset" across the ecosystem. Workshop participants emphasized the need to develop a diverse set of tools and resources to empower every actor within the system. This holistic view is crucial for strengthening the long-term impact and stability of mentoring, especially as a catalyst for advancing youth development within the employment sector.

Insight 2
Guiding principles are needed to support the effective integration of mentoring

Currently, mentoring varies widely in its purpose, structure, and quality. Participants stressed the need for a shared framework that defines effective mentoring for youth employment, while still allowing flexibility for diverse models – from community initiatives to workplace programs. This is important to establish a common understanding of quality and scale effective mentoring appropriately.

Insight 3
Institutional buy-in drives systems change

Building on the need for a multilevel approach (Insight 1), participants stressed that achieving quality mentoring is impossible without true institutional buy-in. This commitment requires embedding mentoring into the organizational culture, policies, and performance measures. This sustained institutional commitment is critical for creating safe spaces, reducing stigma, and ensuring equitable access to mentoring opportunities. When an organization demonstrates conscious buy-in, it fosters similar commitment from all its actors. Ultimately, this institutional support creates the necessary wrap-around infrastructure for quality mentoring, making effective outcomes more likely while minimizing tokenistic, one-off efforts and short-term initiatives.

Insight 4
Mapping mentoring to employment outcomes fosters systems buy-in

A critical way to secure institutional buy-in is to map the impact of mentoring to specific employment outcomes and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This includes broad measures of employment success such as retention within an industry, increased job satisfaction, job-related skills development, a stronger sense of belonging, and safety within the work environment. Currently, this mapping is not done systematically, leading to a lack of shared understanding of the value of mentoring. Using language that resonates with employers can help communicate the value of mentoring to industry stakeholders. Workshop participants also recommended ensuring that the mapping is flexible enough to accommodate non-linear career paths and transitional stages experienced by youth most distant from the labour market.

Linking mentoring impact stories to measurable metrics turns this process into a powerful engagement tool.

Specifically:

Insight 4A
Mapping helps reframe mentoring as a core workplace strategy for employers

Mapping is crucial for employers because it reframes mentoring as a core business tool that contributes directly to organizational objectives. Employers need to see the return on investment (ROI) of mentoring in areas such as talent attraction and retention, employee engagement, and business branding. Reframing mentoring as a workplace strategy – by highlighting its role in streamlining onboarding processes, fostering knowledge exchange, and creating more welcoming and inclusive cultures – is key to securing employers' investment and long-term integration into their organizational practices.

Insight 4B
Mapping encourages youth to value mentoring as a catalyst for employment success

For youth, mapping helps create a clearer connection between mentoring, their participation and their advancement in today's labour market. It reassures them that employment is often non-linear and that success is not defined by a single path or fixed milestones. It encourages them to see the distinct value in different jobs at various life stages – whether a role serves as a training ground for developing foundational and transferable skills, a venue to build social connections, or a stepping-stone towards a long-term career.

Mentors are ideally positioned to use this mapping tool. They can facilitate reflection, helping youth identify the specific skills and knowledge gained at each employment stage. By reframing each job as a valuable learning experience, mentors encourage mentees to make intentional choices about how to learn and leverage skills from every role, fostering advancement along the employment journey.

Insight 5
Mentors as system navigators for youth experiencing barriers to employment

Many young people face challenges not only in understanding what mentoring is and how it aligns with their goals, but also in help-seeking, system navigation, and empowerment more broadly. For effective youth mentoring, the immediate need is not necessarily to launch new programs, but to help young people – especially those most disconnected from education and employment – find, trust, and use what already exists. To achieve this, mentoring must be accessible, flexible, relevant, responsive, and safe. This involves building genuine relationships with youth, their families and communities. Participants agreed that mentoring should empower youth to develop self-advocacy and help-seeking skills.

Insight 6
"Choose Your Own Adventure" approach can help meet diverse needs

Building on the need to address diverse navigation barriers (Insight 5), workshop participants would like mentoring tools and resources to be comprehensive rather than prescriptive. They agreed on the importance of creating a flexible "menu" or resource library with a "Choose Your Own Adventure" navigation design that meets the diverse needs of youth (considering age, identity, experience, and goals). This approach involves developing tools that support both formal and organic (informal) mentoring, as not all youth seek or need a traditional mentor-mentee match. Participants recommended equipping youth and potential mentors with new mentoring tools while relying on the spaces where young people already gather to foster the natural development of relationships.

To be effective, these tools must scaffold learning for both mentors and mentees, honoring the diverse contexts where mentoring happens, and offering culturally relevant options to cultivate mentoring relationships of varying durations. Workshop participants highlighted the importance of this with the following insight:

Insight 6A
A youth-centered approach is essential

For mentoring to effectively address diverse needs and build trust, it must be inherently youth-centered in design. Participants emphasized that the mentoring experience must fundamentally be shaped by the lived experiences, identity, and agency of the youth mentees. This involves adapting opportunities to the mentee's evolving circumstances. It also requires the recognition that "meaningful employment" is unique to each individual, empowering youth to define what is valuable for their own career journey.

Insight 7
Goal-oriented mentoring is important to facilitate employment success

Mentoring should adopt a goal-oriented approach focused on career goals and meaningful employment, rather than linking more broadly to psychosocial development. This approach provides clarity on the scope and expectations for all involved in mentoring relationships. Participants emphasized that aligning mentoring goals with both labour market realities and the personal aspirations of youth enhances motivation and engagement. By focusing on tangible career outcomes, this strategy prioritizes relationships most relevant to the youth's current career stage. It allows for a more thoughtful balance in using mentoring to both foster employability skills and support broader personal growth for youth. It also offers a concrete employment narrative for employers and funders, validating mentoring's impact on strengthening the quality and readiness of the future workforce.

The next two insights are specific examples of mentoring goals:

Insight 7A
### One mentoring goal is to help youth validate and articulate their skills and assets

A key goal for mentoring can be to help youth identify, name, and articulate the skills and assets they gain from all sources, including education, lived experience, and informal settings. As the importance of traditional degrees shifts in hiring, there is a greater need to recognize valuable competencies such as teamwork, time management, and conflict resolution that often come from extracurriculars or lived experiences. Mentors are essential in helping youth shift from a deficit-based to an asset-based perspective, connecting their diverse experiences to the specific language for competencies used by employers.

Insight 7B
Youth value guidance to apply their skills and assets in diverse employment contexts

Building on the need to help youth articulate skills (Insight 7a), participants saw mentoring as vital for guiding youth on the strategic application of skills across different contexts. For example, participants shared thought-provoking stories about how some valuable soft skills, such as critical thinking or questioning authority, are often discouraged in educational settings. They also shared that racialized youth often faced compounded barriers in using these interpersonal skills as they transition to the workplace.
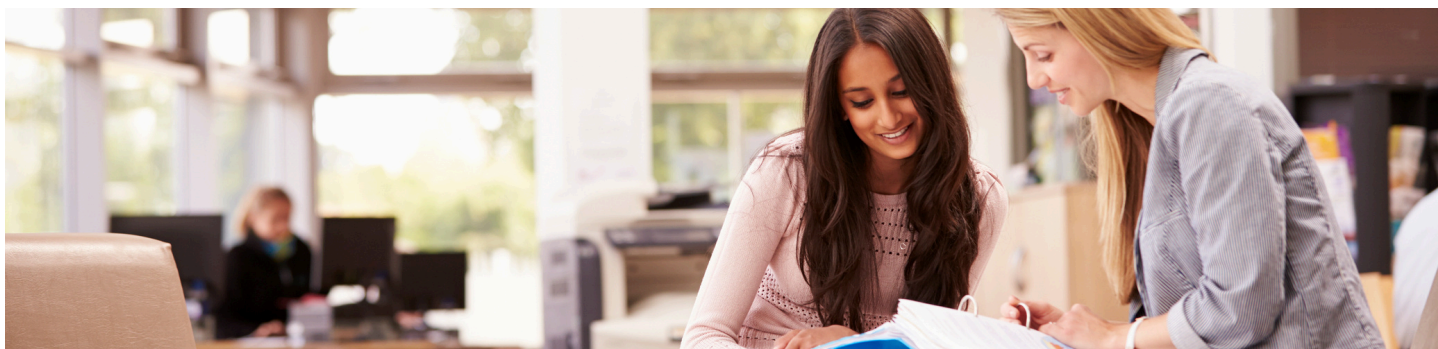
Mentors are crucial in helping youth navigate when and how to apply skills. This includes guiding them to respectfully set professional boundaries, identify potential conflicts of value, and recognize when a workplace is not a good fit. This supports the youth-centered mentoring approach (Insight 6), ensuring support aligns with the mentee's needs.

Trust-based mentorship is essential for quality and sustainability

Trust is essential for quality mentorship. It requires mutual respect not only between mentors and mentees but also between institutions and participants. This foundation is essential for long-term engagement and enabling honest feedback loops that improve the quality of mentoring over time. Workshop discussions highlighted that trust can be easily undermined by a mismatch between youth expectations and the assigned mentors or programs. Building and maintaining this trust requires transparency about goals and expectations, an honest acknowledgment of cultural differences between mentors and mentees, and a commitment to two-way knowledge exchange. Participants emphasized the importance of creating safe spaces where young people feel comfortable expressing their needs and reflecting on how those needs evolve.

Insight 9
Mentoring can build social capital and a resilient web of support

Building on the importance of trust-based relationships (Insight 8), participants articulated a need to shift from an individualistic model to a community-oriented approach that actively develops a young person's social capital and web of support. Framing mentoring as part of youth's circle of care encourages programs to reinforce and work alongside other actors, including family, peers, and community connections. This helps reduce the burden on individual mentors to "have all the answers," positioning them instead as navigators who guide young people through wider networks. This reflects the systemic approach highlighted in Insight 1. It ensures youth have multiple mentors and allies and face minimal risk of broken trust when a single program ends or a mentor leaves. This also ensures that youth are supported at critical transition points throughout their journey.

Insight 10
Sustainability can be observed through a cycle of mentorship

The ultimate sign of mentoring success is the ability to create a self-sustaining cycle of mentorship. This model sees youth transition from mentee to future mentor, a principle often described as "paying it forward." This cycle captures the transformative nature of the experience, helping youth build confidence to see themselves as future mentors and leaders. Whether the initial experience was formal or organic, the cycle reinforces the entire web of support (Insight 9) by ensuring continuity. This final insight emphasizes that lasting success comes when mentorship transforms from experience into a shared responsibility, empowering youth to guide others as they were once guided.

About Mentor Canada

Mission: To accelerate and scale a world-class mentoring in Canada.

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