



# Building Workforce-Ready Grads: Insights from Employers

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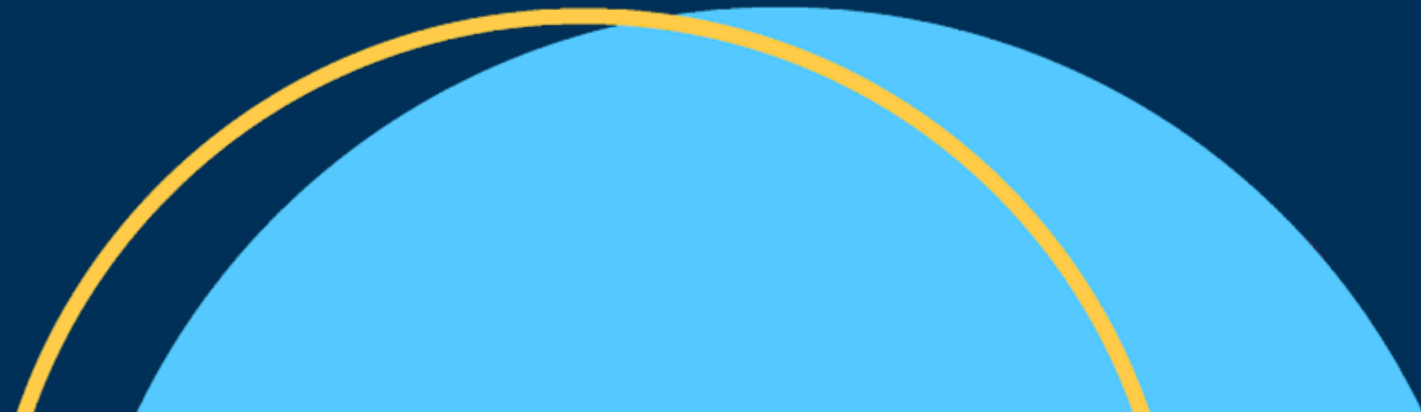
**Business + Higher Education Roundtable**

# Business + Higher Education Roundtable

**BHER** is a national, non-partisan convener linking Canada's largest employers + post-secondary institutions. We are the only organization in Canada that brings together the country's top companies and leading post-secondary institutions to tackle skills, talent, and economic challenges. Our mission: *Create opportunity through collaboration.*

BHER is funded by **ISED** to scale high-quality **work-integrated learning (WIL)** nationwide. Since 2019, we have supported the creation of **70 000 + WIL opportunities**, with **10 000 employers engaged**. Our goal is for 100 % of Canadian students to have at least one WIL experience before graduation.

Our key focus – building sustainable regional WIL ecosystems, not one-off projects.





# What Skills Do Employers Want?

- Persistent demand for **social + emotional** skills → communication, teamwork, critical thinking, adaptability.
- These drive productivity & positive culture; least replaceable by AI.
- **Evolving technical needs** → AI literacy, data fluency, cybersecurity, green and digital skills.
- Employers have rising expectations for early talent, accelerated by AI.



# How AI Is Changing Entry-Level Roles

1

Automation is removing routine “training” tasks once given to new hires.

2

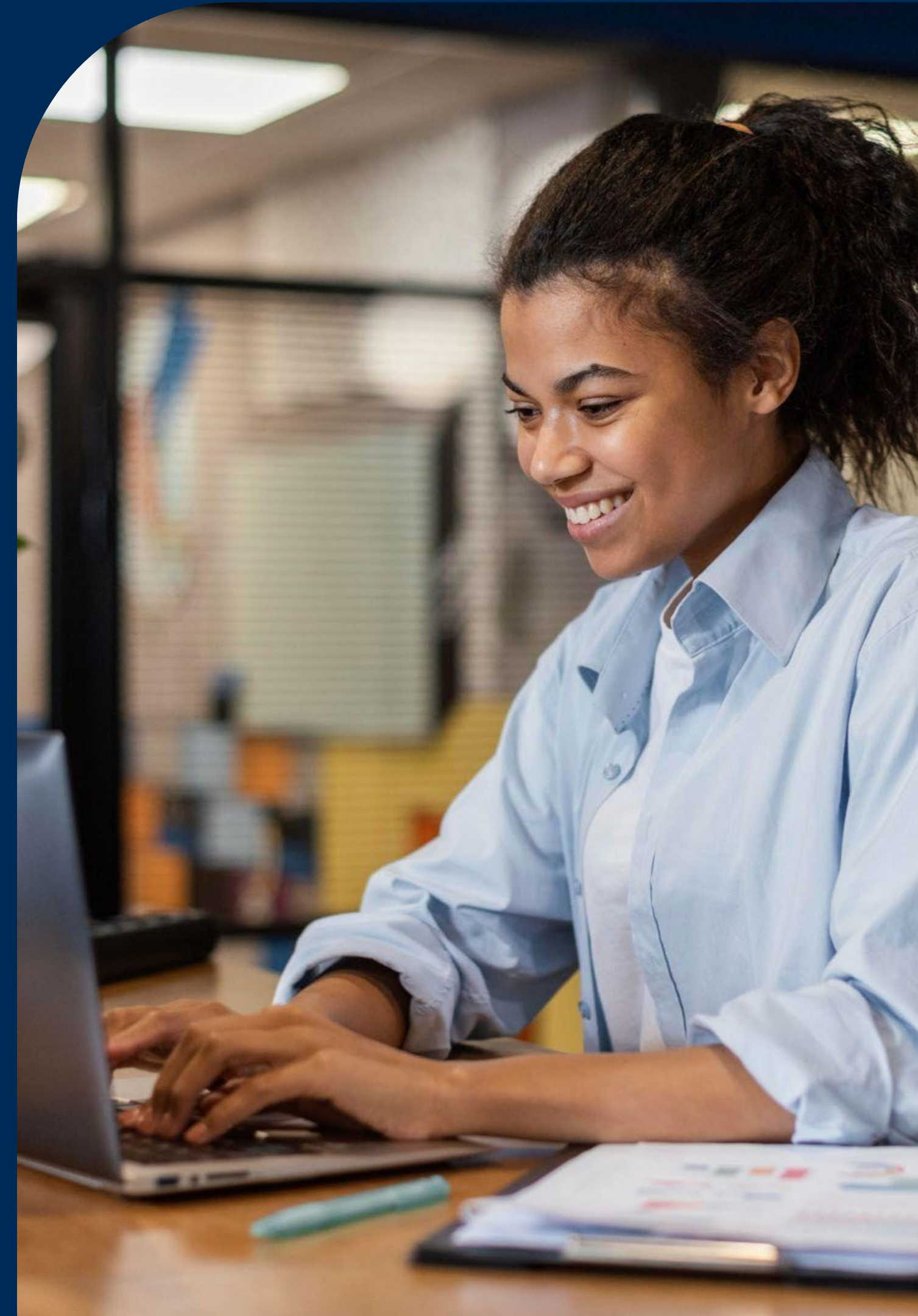
Entry-level work now demands:

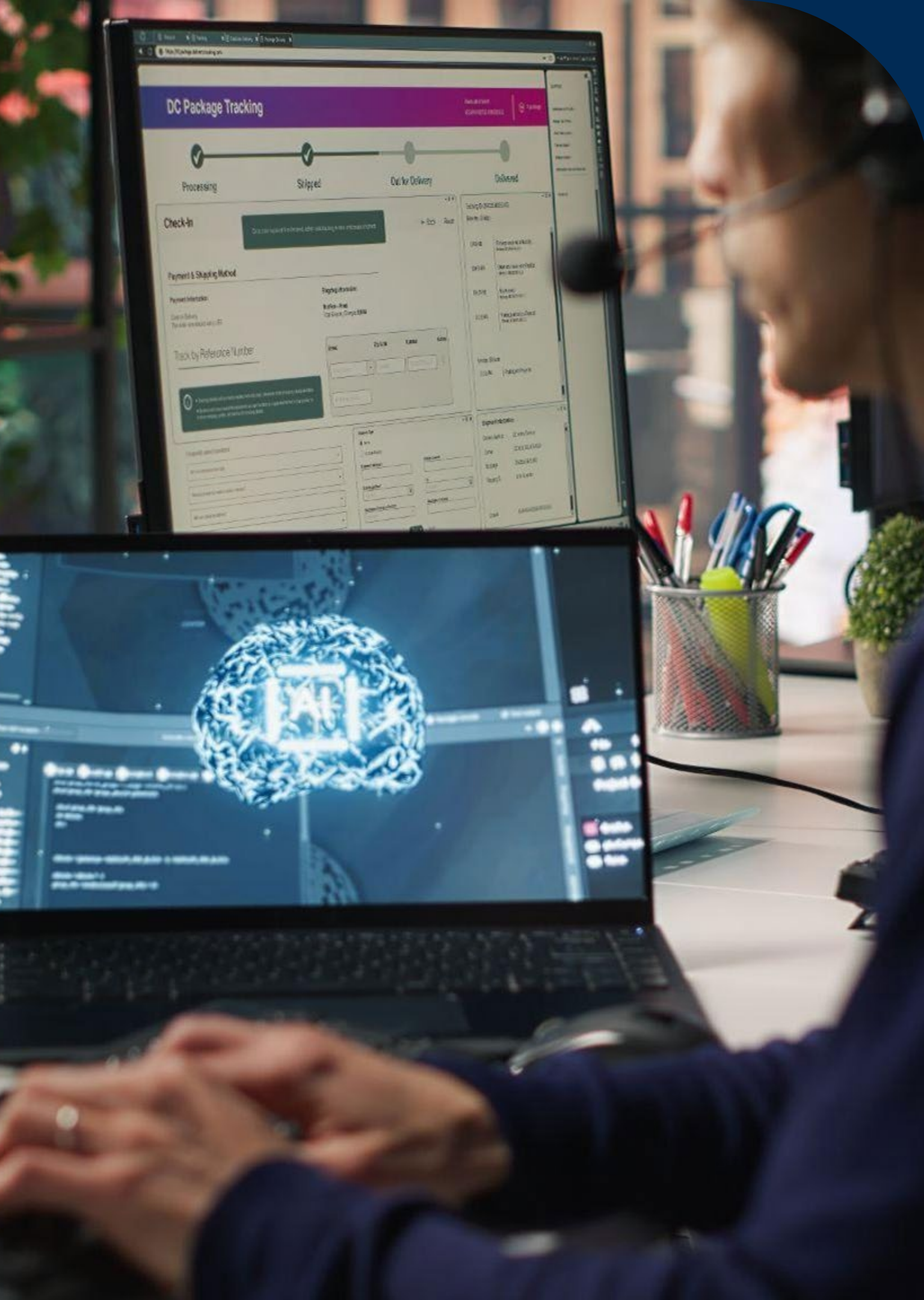
- Acumen & digital comfort; ability to leverage AI to create value from day one.
- Stronger critical thinking and editing skills.

3

Emerging pattern:

“task doers → value adders.”





# From AI Literacy to AI Fluency

- Gap in AI literacy is not a lack of tool knowledge but a deficiency in critical thinking and business acumen. Employees often propose AI solutions without understanding the business problem.
- If AI literacy is the ability to use the tools, AI fluency is the ability to go beyond: to identify an opportunity or problem, decide whether – and how – AI should address it, and run a test or pilot to prove it.
- Key competencies: critical thinking, systems thinking, commercial awareness, business acumen, communication, emotional intelligence, disciplined problem-solving.



# How WIL Helps Address Human Skills & AI Literacy

- BHER and its partners are using Curricular WIL & Placements to respond to these AI fluency challenges:
  - **Curricular WIL** - Enables students from multiple disciplines to work together on industry-relevant AI challenges, producing results and strengthening AI fluency
  - **Industry paid placements** - Students applying AI tools to real business contexts and providing support to strengthen AI adoption, while building AI fluency
- Strengthening assessment is crucial: pre, during, and post
- Pre WIL and upskilling during WIL also play a key role, especially if students know where they're starting from



# Assessing the Non-Technical Skills Gap: **Knockri Project**

- Social and emotional skills = #1 employer priority (communication, teamwork, problem-solving).
- Most WIL programs lack tools to assess or track them at scale.

→ **BHER + Knockri + University of Calgary** developing AI-powered, bias-free NTS assessment platform.

→ Video-based behavioural interviews scored via I-O psychology algorithms.

→ Students receive: personalized feedback + growth plans + pre/post WIL benchmarks.

→ Institutions customize to target program outcomes.

→ **Equity by design:** reduces bias in evaluation and broadens access to recognition.

→ Embedding Knockri into WIL = evidence-based human-skills development + fairer assessment for all students.

***“First time I felt seen for my skills, not overlooked for my background.”***

- Student



# WIL in Action

## Western University & TechAlliance



- Challenge: SSHA students under-represented in WIL and tech careers. Tech SMEs struggling to find talent.
- Model: Short, course-based industry projects with London SMEs in digital + tech sectors.
- Scale: **1 067 students, 16 companies, 8 courses, 2 000 + WIL experiences.**
- Impact: Stronger SME engagement, faculty buy-in, and replicable model for low-barrier curricular WIL.

## Shopify Dev Degree / York / Bow Valley Programs



- **Sponsored degree model:** students split time between academic study & paid work.
- **3 800 + hours** of on-the-job learning while earning degree → stronger technical skills, retention & financial access.
- **Employer ROI:** higher productivity and graduate loyalty vs. traditional hires.
- Demonstrates deep industry-academic co-design and how WIL can become a core training model for Canada's tech sector.



# Closing Thoughts

Canada's leading employer need early professionals with strong social and emotional skills. They're also looking for AI-ready talent: not just tech users but value adders. Together, employers and post-secondaries can build talent solutions, including:

- Scaling a spectrum of WIL opportunities, from curricular WIL to longer, apprenticeship-style placements
- Delivering stronger assessments to get students meaningful feedback on these skill sets earlier, such as video-based behavioural interviews

