

UNDERSTANDING CAPACITY
NEEDS IN NOVA SCOTIA'S
COMMUNITY IMPACT SECTOR

CAPACITY BUILDING

SURVEY REPORT

Presented by:



In Partnership with:



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Introduction

In late 2019, the Community Sector Council of Nova Scotia (CSCNS) engaged over 160 leaders across Nova Scotia's community impact sector to help shape the [CSCNS 3-year strategic plan](#) (2020-2023). Three main priority areas of work emerged from the process: Educate & Innovate, Collaborate & Activate, and Advocate & Celebrate. Shortly after the plan was released, COVID-19 forced adaptations across the organization and the sector. The Black Lives Matter movement and the graves found at residential schools across the country further solidified the need to work actively against racism and toward reconciliation. In this context, we launched a 4-part sector engagement process during the spring of 2021 to better understand capacity needs current/immediate capacity needs for nonprofit and voluntary organizations in Nova Scotia.

At the same time, Inspiring Communities was working with the Province of Nova Scotia to research, coordinate and facilitate a series of community-based engagement sessions. These sessions were aimed at increasing collective capacity and strengthening relationships amongst stakeholder groups to work together to address poverty-related concerns in NS. Given that both organizations intended to survey the sector around capacity needs and learning opportunities, we agreed to work in partnership to design and deliver the survey.

The Survey was developed collaboratively by CSCNS (with [Big Waves](#) consulting) and [Inspiring Communities](#). Questions were designed with the purpose of:

- Understanding capacity needs in non-profit/social impact organizations
- Identifying skills to overcome barriers and achieve collective impact
- Identifying root causes or challenges and developing resources and opportunities to collectively address them

This report presents the quantitative data collected in the NS Community Impact Sector Capacity Building Survey (the survey). For more information about the broader sector engagement process conducted by CSCNS and the qualitative themes that emerged in the open-ended survey questions, visit our Learning Framework and Consultant's Report on our web site.

Survey Respondents

The survey was distributed via the CSCNS and Inspiring Communities email distribution lists and social media channels in March/April 2021. A total of 193 respondents participated from across the province.

Table 1:
Respondents' Roles and Organization Types

	Total # of Respondents	193
Respondent Role	% Respondents at ED or Senior Leadership Level	101 (52.3%)
	% Respondents Serving as Board Members	27 (14.0%)
	% Respondents working as Volunteers	20 (10.4%)
Organizational Type	Not-for-Profit Society	113 (58.6%)
	Grassroots/Voluntary Organizations	19 (9.8%)
	Registered Charities	72 (37.1%)
	Community Interest Companies (CICs)	9 (4.7%)
	Government*	21 (10.9%)
Organizational Size	Organizations with less than 5 employees	76 (39.4%)
	Organizations with more than 20 employees	55 (28.5%)
	Organizations with an operating budget < \$250K**	50 (25.9%)
	Organizations with an operating budget > \$1M	39 (20.2%)
Location Served by the Organization	Halifax County (mainly urban)	58 (30.1%)
	Cape Breton County (somewhat urban)	26 (13.5%)
	Entire Province	66 (34.2%)

*Due to the connection with the Provincial Poverty Reduction Blueprint in relation to Inspiring Communities' work, the survey was circulated to government staff who were involved in relevant initiatives

**54 organizations (28%) did not know their annual operating budget or preferred not to disclose

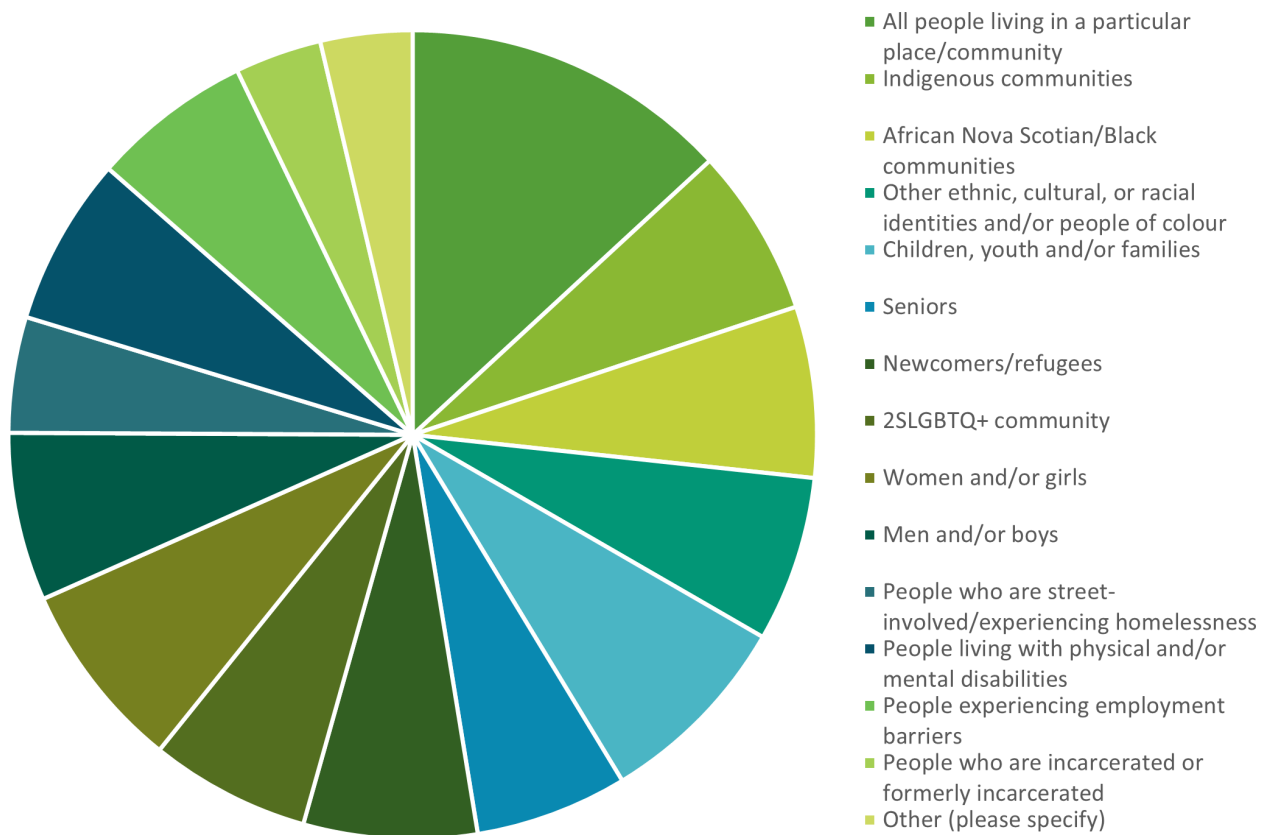
As illustrated in Table 1, respondents represented a range of geographic locations, experience and organization size. 48% of respondents had worked in the sector for less than 10 years and 25% had more than 25 years' experience.

In terms of the organizational mission, the top 5 responses were selected as the most accurate description (n=193):

- Advancing social inclusion (28%)
- Health and health promotion (23%)
- Social services (22%)
- Poverty reduction (20%)
- Education and research (18%)

The Community Impact Sector provides supports and services to a wide range of vulnerable populations. This is reflected in relation to the responses to the question regarding which demographic groups are served, as illustrated in Figure 1 (n=193). As examples, 65% indicated they serve all people living in a particular place/ community; 33% serve Indigenous communities; 34% serve African NS/ Black communities; and 39% serve children, youth and families.

Figure 1: Diversity of People Served by the Sector



Organizational Challenges and Workplace Culture

This section of the survey was aimed at exploring challenges facing organizations that they would like to be better equipped to address to help inform our approach to offering learning opportunities.

Internal Challenges

As shown in Figure 2, fundraising and funding diversification emerged as a top concern, followed closely by workload and burnout (n=147).



We ran several correlation tests to dig deeper into whether some challenges were greater based on certain organizational characteristics. There was a significant positive correlation between not-for-profit societies and all the internal challenges listed ($p \leq 0.05$) except for justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (JEDI), leadership, collaboration and partnerships, volunteer recruitment and management. This doesn't mean these topics aren't important, but other challenges such as fundraising, financial management, workload and burnout, etc., had a statistically significant relationship and rated as higher priorities.

For voluntary/grassroots organizations, a positive significant relationship existed with challenges related to the board of directors and volunteer recruitment and management ($p \leq 0.01$) - likely due to the fact that they often don't have paid staff. Organizations with higher revenues had a significant negative correlation with fundraising challenges, board issues, and volunteer management challenges ($p \leq 0.05$), meaning the higher the revenue the less these are concerns.

External Challenges

In terms of challenges specific to the external environment, respondents indicated again that funding models (e.g., grant-based approach, lack of operational funds, etc.) were the greatest issue (57%). The complexity of the problems organizations are trying to solve was the second-highest challenge (47%), and global events (e.g., COVID-19, climate change, political upheaval, etc.) were third (38%). Systemic inequities and racism were next on the list at 21%. (n=147)

“How to change minds - prevent violence against women, prevent MMIW and rape, poverty reduction, prevent racism and classism; being heard and respected.”

- Survey Respondent, on what's needed to affect change

Workplace Culture Challenges

Organizations selected aspects of workplace culture that they would like to become better equipped to address. They were limited to 3 selections and the following emerged as the priority areas (n=147):

- Managing workload and burnout – 32.7%
- Mental health in the workplace – 30.6%
- Creating inclusive workplace culture – 28.6%

These priorities were far and above the other options – constructive conflict and communication was the next highest selected at 19%. This finding illustrates how prominent burnout and mental health are for the sector.

When we ran pairwise correlations for the types of workplace culture challenges, we found that a significant positive relationship exists between managing workload and burnout, psychological health and safety ($p \leq 0.05$), giving and receiving feedback ($p \leq 0.05$), clarifying roles and responsibilities ($p \leq 0.05$), and delegation and time management ($p \leq 0.01$). Interestingly, delegation and time management had the highest p-value and therefore strongest relationship. Each of these challenges require strong leadership skills to address.

Desired Learning Opportunities

Survey questions were included to help us understand specific areas related to external communications, evaluation and impact assessment, and collaboration that would be helpful for organizations to have training opportunities for. Respondents were asked to rate statements on a scale of 1-7 where 1 = not beneficial and 7 = greatly beneficial. The percentages reported below represent the combined sum of respondents that answered 6 or 7 for each statement in the following categories:

(Note: only the most commonly selected options are listed below; while other topics were of interest to the sector, these were prioritized by a difference of at least 5 percentage points over others)

Relationship development for communication and collaboration (n=110):

- Developing relationships with organizations in other cultural communities in the province – **59.6%**
- Developing relationships across shared focus-areas – **57.3%**
- Developing relationships with government and/or funders – **49.1%**
- Coordinating information sharing across and between sectors – **48.6%**

External Communications (n=110):

- Advocacy and influencing policy decision-making – **58.7%**
- Communicating activities and impact – **54.6%**

Evaluation and Impact Assessment (n=110):

- Enhancing evaluation skills – **50%**
- Effective sharing of research and evaluation outcomes – **47.7%** (*tied closely to communications*)
- Effective application of research and evaluation outcomes – **47.3%**

Program and Service Delivery (n=108):

- Strategic planning and activity planning – **53.7%**
- Piloting/ prototyping ideas (i.e., how to pilot projects to create the case for new policies/ programming) – **47.2%**

Event Facilitation (n=108):

- Engaging community through online tools – **54.6%**

“There is more work that could be done to strengthen our industry and increase employment but it is difficult to achieve without more HR capacity, which would require more / more diversified funding.”

- Survey Respondent, on the need for more HR capacity

Preferred Formats and Organizational Priority

When asked to select which modes of learning and delivery methods that are found to be most effective, respondents indicated that in-person (82.3%), blended learning (a mix of online and in-person) (63.5%), and collaborative problem solving (61.5%) are preferred. 50% indicated a preference for online-only learning, and 28% prefer asynchronous learning (on their own time). This information is important for informing our ongoing approaches to offering learning opportunities to the sector, especially as we move beyond pandemic restrictions.

We also included a question about whether organizations set aside time/budget for staff to participate in online learning to get a sense about the extent to which learning is prioritized. 97 people responded to the question and 78% of those indicated that yes, their organization does set aside resources. *(Note that this question focused on online learning due to the context of COVID-19, but it is likely that the findings could be applied to a variety of learning methods)*

Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI)

We are committed to supporting efforts to work against racism and raise awareness of historic injustices that have contributed to systemic inequities. JEDI is a priority for many organizations in the sector, although implementation has been raised as a challenge. We included survey questions to dive deeper into understanding where organizations have found success and where they have faced confusion and/or challenges so we can better shape capacity building offerings in this area.

118 people responded to the questions related to JEDI work. As illustrated in Table 2 below, the greatest reported challenges pertain to contracting suppliers from equity-seeking groups, implementing steps toward Indigenization/ decolonization, and recruiting diverse board members.

Table 2:
Implementation of JEDI Commitments

	We have successfully implemented this action (# of organizations)	We have tried to implement this but found it challenging / confusing (# of organizations)
JEDI Training for Staff and/or Volunteers	44	12
Changes Policies and Procedures to support JEDI	33	15
Implemented steps to address Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report or other efforts toward Indigenization/Decolonization	23	23
Provided mentorship and pathways for people from diverse/equity-seeking groups	35	18
Addressed barriers to employment for diverse/equity-seeking groups	38	13
Addressed workplace culture dynamics that make the workplace unwelcoming for people from diverse/equity-seeking groups	37	18
Made JEDI part of Strategic Goals	36	17
Made a public of visible commitment to JEDI	32	16
Recruited Board Members from diverse/equity-seeking groups	36	20
Created/strengthened community partnerships to foster diversity	47	11
Contracted suppliers and contractors from diverse/equity-seeking groups	13	23
Reviewed programming to ensure it is culturally appropriate and inclusive	47	12
Incorporated self-reflective practice in service delivery	38	12
Created a friendly, welcoming, safe, non-judgemental approach and space	69	8

Perceived Organizational Impact

As part of our efforts to develop skills and capacity in the sector, we wanted to understand where we may have the greatest effect on organizations' impact so that we can target learning opportunities accordingly. In order to assess relationships between organizational behaviours and impact, it was important to include questions designed to capture how respondents perceive the success of their organization in terms of meeting their social, environmental and/or cultural objectives. The following statements were asked, based on research assessing perceived social impact¹ (average responses based on a 7-point scale are in brackets):

- The majority of people served experienced improvements to their quality of life as a result of the services we provided in the past year (5.42)
- The number of programs and services offered has increased in the past year (4.40)
- The quality of services has improved in the past year (4.64)
- People are generally satisfied with the services provided (5.48)
- Overall, what level of success has the organization had in meeting its social, cultural and/or environmental goals and objectives? (5.19)

Note that the lowest average response related to increases in numbers of programs and services, which may have been skewed by COVID-19.

Responses were based on a 7-point scale assessing the degree to which respondents believed their organization had achieved success, ranging from 1 = very low to 7 = very high. The five statements (items) were then combined into a single scale to capture overall perceived social impact (n = 99; standardized average interitem correlation = 0.3147; α = 0.6966).

“How to manage in this ever changing world, yet still do it effectively, respectfully, and in a manner that maintains high quality.”

- Survey Respondent, on the need for leadership training

Learning Organizations

We asked survey participants to rank their organizations on a scale of 1-7 (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) on a series of 13 statements designed to assess the extent to which they perceived their organization as nurturing learning and growth. We were particularly interested in the indicators associated with learning organizations² due to their relevance with factors associated with managing burnout (e.g., psychological safety, feedback, leadership) and innovation. The statements included in the survey are listed as indicators in Table 3 and average responses are indicated within brackets.

Table 3:
Indicators of Learning Organizations

Element	Indicator
Learning Environment	
Psychological Safety	We can safely disagree with colleagues or supervisors (5.47)
Appreciation of Differences	We can make mistakes and ask questions when we don't know something (5.87)
Openness to New Ideas	We are encouraged to take risks and try new things (5.41)
Time for Reflection	We take time to thoughtfully reflect on our experiences and learn from them (5.42)
Feedback	We have time in the day to reflect on what we are doing (4.39)
Purpose	We are encouraged to change direction when we realize we are not meeting our goals (5.39)
Learning Processes and Practices	
Orientation	We get feedback on our work from multiple sources including colleagues and supervisors (4.76)
Generation	We feel our work is connected to something bigger than ourselves (6.21)
Interpretation	Our learning is connected to and in support of our organization's core purpose (5.74)
Dissemination	Leaders prompt dialogue and debate (5.26)
Leadership	
Listening and Questioning	Leaders are willing to entertain alternative points of view (5.49)
Ensuring Process	Leaders make their own learning visible and model the practices of a learner (5.24)
Openness	We share what we learn with each other (5.49)
Modeling	We share what we learn with others outside our organization (5.09)

Based on "Indicators of a Learning Organization", Exhibit 9.1, Aguilar, E. (2016). The art of coaching teams: Building resilient communities that transform schools. John Wiley & Sons.

Based on the average responses for each statement, respondents feel best about the sense that their work is connected to something bigger than themselves, and are facing the greatest challenge with having time in the day to reflect on what is being done.

The 13 statements (items) were then combined into a single scale to capture the overall extent to which an organization is aligned with behaviours associated with learning organizations (n = 99; standardized average interitem correlation = 0.6376; $\alpha = 0.9581$).

We ran a regression analysis to determine whether learning organizations are a predictor of social impact and found a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.27$, $R^2 = 0.08$, $F(1,53) = 4.36$, $p \leq 0.05$). This means that learning organizations tend to have greater impact due to intentional investments in training and skills designed to address workplace burnout and and create learning environments.

We also ran each statement (or item) independently in regression analyses with perceived social impact to assess the extent to which it affected the organization's success. The items with the strongest predictive effect on impact included **sharing learning with each other** ($\beta = 0.38$, $R^2 = 0.15$, $F(1,55) = 10.01$, $p \leq 0.01$); the **ability to safely disagree with colleagues or supervisors** ($\beta = 0.31$, $R^2 = 0.14$, $F(1,55) = 9.07$, $p \leq 0.01$); and, **ensuring learning is connected to and in support of the organization's core purpose** ($\beta = 0.27$, $R^2 = 0.08$, $F(1,54) = 5.83$, $p \leq 0.05$).

“Our attempts to collaborate with other service providers in the area are often a struggle due to limited professional capacity of other organizations or walls built and other organizations working within silos. This leads to staff within our organization feeling burnt out. We are also at a stage where demand and capacity push and pull back and forth. Demand is higher, but there isn't quite enough for new staff/programs yet.”

- Survey Respondent, on the need for collaboration and partnership

Workplace Culture and Wellbeing

We asked survey participants to rank their organizations on a scale of 1-7 (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) on a series of 12 statements designed to assess how they perceived their organization's workplace culture and wellbeing.³ These include (average responses in brackets):

- Our workplace promotes work-life balance (5.36)
- Our workplace effectively handles conflict among employees (4.82)
- People at work show sincere respect for each other's ideas, values and beliefs (5.59)
- People in my organization feel appreciated for the skills and resources we bring to the work (5.51)
- We know what we are expected to do in our roles (5.29)
- We are encouraged to participate in decisions that impact our work (5.56)
- People at our workplace are held accountable for their actions (5.32)
- My organization has prepared me to deal with the psychological and emotional demands of my job (4.30)
- My workplace is committed to minimizing unnecessary stress at work (4.66)
- People in my workplace understand the importance of protecting emotional wellbeing at work (5.27)
- We celebrate our shared accomplishments (5.77)
- We value the contribution of everyone in the workplace (5.86)

Three areas where respondents indicated lowest levels of agreement included how prepared they feel to deal with the psychological and emotional demands of their work, minimizing workplace stress, and managing conflict among staff.

The 12 statements (items) were then combined into a single scale to capture the overall extent to which an organization is aligned with behaviours associated with positive workplace cultures (n = 99; standardized average interitem correlation = 0.6132; α = 0.9501).

We ran a regression analysis to determine whether healthy workplace cultures are a predictor of social impact and found a significant positive effect (β = 0.34, R^2 = 0.12, $F(1,54) = 7.31$, $p \leq 0.01$). Based on the regression results, workplace culture has a greater predictive relationship with impact than learning organizations, although some elements such as the ability to resolve conflicts are closely related. This means that organizations with positive workplace cultures that prioritize wellbeing tend to have greater impact, and supports the case for investing in training designed to develop skills related to culture development.

We followed the first regression analysis with one aimed at understanding whether having a positive culture is a predictor of being a learning organization. We found a very strong significant relationship here ($\beta = 0.95$, $R^2 = 0.77$, $F(1,91) = 300.89$, $p \leq 0.001$). These results indicate that if a healthy workplace culture is in place, there is a much higher likelihood that the organization is nurturing learning.

When we explored pairwise correlations for each individual element of healthy workplace cultures with perceived social impact, we found that the following had the greatest significant relationship ($p \leq 0.01$): respect for each other's ideas, values and beliefs; role clarity; encouragement to participate in decisions that affect one's work; accountability for actions.

“We are very dependent on government grants and subsidies to operate and need to develop our own fundraising and revenue diversification to ensure sustainability in the long term.”

- Survey Respondent, on the lack of funding diversity

Entrepreneurialism

The idea of having an entrepreneurial orientation⁴ has been studied extensively in for-profit organizations and has been increasingly applied to the context of social enterprises and nonprofits.⁵ The components of entrepreneurial orientation include risk-taking, innovativeness and proactiveness, and much research exists linking these behaviours to performance (especially profit). We adapted existing measures (Hughes & Morgan, 2007) and included the following statements aimed at capturing the extent to which organizations are being entrepreneurial in seeking and implementing new opportunities (average responses in brackets):

- People in our organization are encouraged to take calculated risks with new ideas (5.01)
- Our organization encourages both exploration and experimentation for new opportunities (5.25)
- We actively introduce improvements and innovations in our organization (5.32)
- Our organization is creative in its methods of operation (5.16)
- We always try to take the initiative in everything we do (5.44)
- Our organization prioritizes and makes time for strategic thinking (4.65)

4 - Hughes, M., & Morgan, R. E. (2007). Deconstructing the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and business performance at the embryonic stage of firm growth. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 36(5), 651-661.

5 - Morris, M. H., Webb, J. W., & Franklin, R. J. (2011). Understanding the Manifestation of Entrepreneurial Orientation in the Nonprofit Context. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 35(5), 947-971.

The area with the lowest level agreement pertained to making time for strategic thinking, which aligns with findings related to lack of time for reflection, etc. in other questions.

The six statements (items) were then combined into a single scale to capture the overall extent to which an organization is aligned with behaviours associated with entrepreneurialism (n = 99; standardized average interitem correlation = 0.6968; $\alpha = 0.9324$).

We ran a regression analysis to determine whether behaviours linked to entrepreneurialism are a predictor of social impact and again found a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.28$, $R^2 = 0.09$, $F(1,55) = 5.34$, $p \leq 0.05$). Based on the regression results, entrepreneurialism has a slightly less predictive relationship than learning organizations.

When we explored the elements individually in relation to social impact, we found significant positive correlations between them except for taking risks and creativity in methods of operation. Research has shown a negative relationship between risk and performance in social contexts, and more work is needed to understand why. Generally, nonprofits are less likely to embrace risks due to constraints of funding structures and the potential implications for vulnerable people of taking chances and failing. These findings support the case for investing in training

designed to develop skills related to being innovative and proactive, and continuing to explore how calculated risk-taking can play a role in innovation.

“Trying to ensure staff are supported and engaged in their work to the best of their ability.”

- Survey Respondent

Resourcefulness

The final set of behaviours we incorporated into the survey to assess their affect on impact pertain to the resourcefulness of organizations, especially in terms of their ability to make do with existing resources. The statements included are adapted from scales⁷ used in the field of “bricolage”, which speaks to being able to make do/ work with/ recombine resources at hand.⁸ Again, participants were asked to rank their organizations on a scale of 1-7 (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) on a series of seven statements designed to assess how they perceived their organization’s degree of resourcefulness.

6 - Alarifi, G., Robson, P., & Kromidha, E. (2018). The manifestation of entrepreneurial orientation in the social entrepreneurship context. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 1-21.

7 - Davidsson, P., Baker, T., & Senyard, J. M. (2017). A measure of entrepreneurial bricolage behavior. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 23(1), 114-135.

8 - Baker, T., & Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. *Administrative science quarterly*, 50(3), 329-366.

These include (average responses in brackets):

- We feel confident that we will be able to access the resources necessary for our work (4.55)
- We usually find workable solutions to new challenges by using our existing resources (5.17)
- We use any existing resource that seems useful to respond to a new problem or opportunity (5.42)
- When dealing with new problems or opportunities we immediately take action by assuming we will find a workable solution (5.18)
- By combining our existing resources we take on a wide range of new challenges (5.01)
- We are confident we have or can find the resources we need to not have to cut corners on operational expenses (4.46)
- We see other organizations as collaborators with whom we can expand the scope of our resources (5.50)

Areas where respondents indicated lowest levels of agreement included their confidence that they can find resources needed to do their work, and that they can find these resources without having to cut operational expenses. It is concerning that operational expenses are vulnerable when resources are scarce and speaks to a larger underlying issue in the sector in relation to funding models and availability.

The seven statements (items) were then combined into a single scale to capture the overall extent to which an organization is aligned with behaviours associated with positive workplace cultures (n = 99; standardized average interitem correlation = 0.5672; α = 0.8676). workplace (5.86).

As with the other scales, we ran a regression analysis to determine whether resourcefulness is a predictor of social impact, but in this case we did not find a significant positive effect. We did, however, find that it is a strong significant positive predictor of learning organizations ($\beta = 0.50$, $R^2 = 0.23$, $F(1,93) = 29.35$, $p \leq 0.001$). There were also significant positive correlations ($p \leq 0.01$) between resourcefulness, healthy workplace cultures, and entrepreneurialism. This means that while resourcefulness may not necessarily have a direct effect on impact, it is an important pre-condition for other behaviours that do.

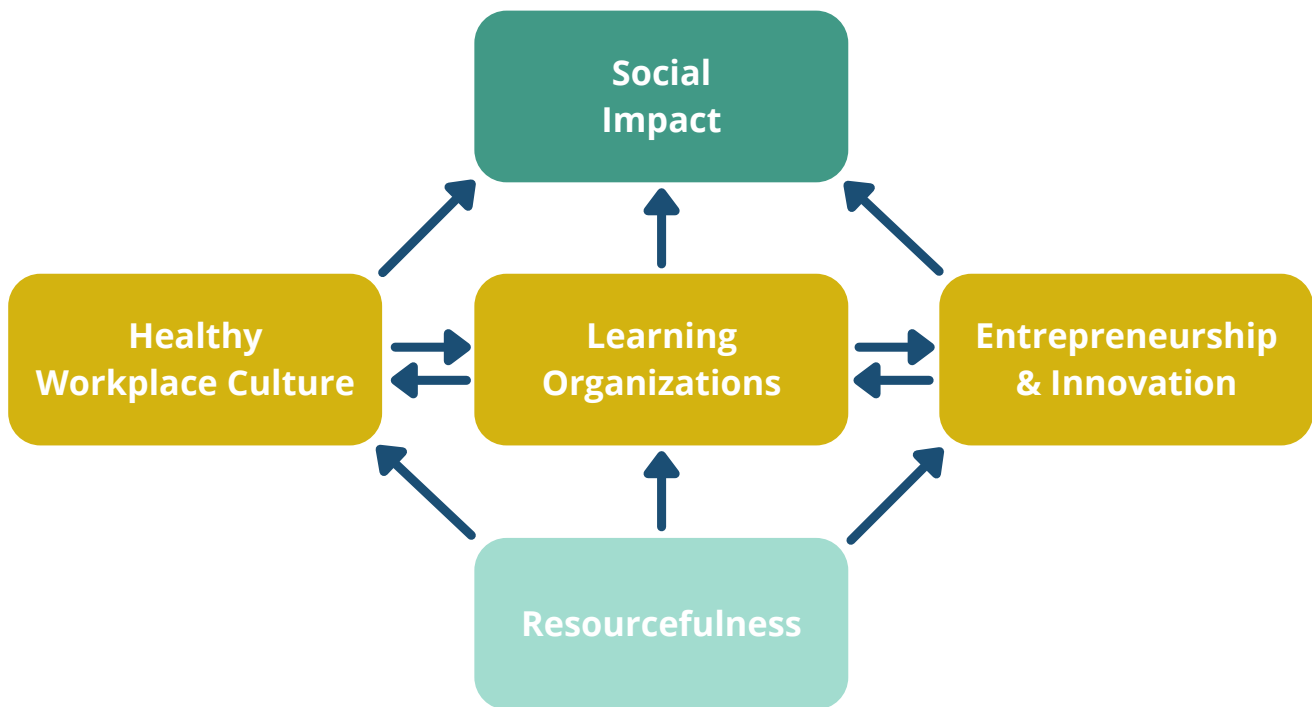
“Workload and burnout - how to rest when the work feels critical”

- Survey Respondent, on the need for capacity building around burnout

Organizational Behaviours and Impact

Based on the preceding sections and our findings related to groups of organizational behaviours and their relationships with perceived social impact, we developed the following summary model to illustrate the relative strength of predictive relationships:

Figure 3:
Organizational Behaviours Affecting impact



Conclusion

The data from this survey feeds into a broader sector engagement process related to capacity building needs and more detail on this process can be found on the CSCNS web site here. As with any survey data, there are limitations associated with the point in time at which the data was collected (during a pandemic) and the subjectivity of respondents. However, given the consistency of the answers provided and concerns raised pertaining to workplace cultures and learning environments in particular, these will be core elements of our approach to capacity building going forward.

We appreciate the time taken and insights shared by those who participated and hope this research is found to be useful and valuable in a variety of contexts!

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