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Effective Strategies for Mitigating Skills Gaps Postpandemic in the Automotive Industry

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2025

Abstract

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Neil Shah

MBA, Walden University, 2021

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Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Inadequate approaches to filling employee skill gaps can seriously weaken workforce stability and organizational performance. Canadian automotive sector leaders are concerned about the risk of persistent employment shortages, high employee turnover, and decreased productivity. Grounded in Alderfer's existence, relatedness, and growth theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to identify and explore the strategies employed by Canadian auto manufacturers to address skill shortages in their workforce in the wake of the pandemic and subsequent digitalization. Six senior executives from Canadian auto manufacturers who led successful skill-development and retention initiatives participated in semistructured interviews, complemented by a review of publicly accessible organizational documents. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (a) upskilling for technology as a strategic response to change, (b) evolving workforce skill gaps and talent flow, (c) motivation and retention beyond compensation, and (d) learning partnerships as long-term development strategies. A key recommendation for increasing employee engagement and adaptability is that companies should implement performance-based learning incentives and flexible, inclusive training models. The implications for positive social change include the potential for automotive leaders to lower barriers to employment for underrepresented groups, foster fair access to skill development, and strengthen community resilience through collaborative workforce planning, thereby enabling broader economic participation and equity.

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Dedication

I lovingly dedicate this study to my grandparents, Sardar Makhan Singh Kala ("Darji"), Sardarni Harbans Kaur Kala ("Wazi"), and Hiralal Virchand Shah ("Dadaji"). Their strength, wisdom, and values continue to guide me every day. And above all, I offer my deepest gratitude to Waheguru for His constant blessings and grace.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

In this study, I explored the strategies Canadian automotive organizations used after the COVID-19 pandemic ended and skills gaps emerged. While Robertson (2018) identified workplace skills gaps as a significant challenge that could adversely affect the world's economic progress, post-COVID-19, the technology-driven economy has exacerbated the skills gaps and made existing skills obsolete (Booker et al., 2022; Lertpiromsuk et al., 2022; Li, 2022; Lund et al., 2021).

As a result of skills gaps, key positions in many organizations remain unfilled, and increased staff turnover, reduced morale, and diminished work quality have negatively impacted business performance. Betti and Sarens (2021) warned that digitalization changes had increased the need to scale up skills rapidly. To remain competitive, automobile manufacturers must create a more flexible manufacturing environment, reduce engineering time and costs, and accelerate speed to market (Malacarne, 2022). The World Economic Forum (2023) stated that by 2025, half of all workers will need to learn new skills because of changes in technology. In the automotive industry, reskilling is not just about learning new technical skills; it is also about learning how to communicate digitally and work with people from different departments (Leončikas et al., 2025).

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem is that some automotive industry leaders lack strategies to mitigate skills gaps in the post-pandemic automotive industry. Therefore, the purpose of this pragmatic qualitative inquiry was to explore the needs-based strategies automotive leaders used to reduce employee skills gaps postpandemic. I identified and interviewed Canadian automotive leaders who have addressed skill gaps postpandemic. With a known population size of approximately 82 leaders from nine companies (Carlier, 2024), purposive sampling, as recommended by Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024), was employed. Selection criteria included age, executive status, and industry experience, which aligned with Shakibamanesh and Ebrahimi's (2020) suggestion for comprehensive research.

I purposively sampled six Canadian automotive leaders who met specific criteria: aged 30 or above, high-level executives with at least 5 years of experience in the industry, and had successfully addressed skill gaps postpandemic. To find participants, I emailed invitations to targeted groups of potential participants through my knowledge of industry connections. I also reviewed publicly accessible documentation as a secondary data source. Thus, online documents and interview transcripts were my two data sources. The study was grounded in a motivation theory by Alderfer (1969), who included three simple concepts: existence, relatedness, and growth (ERG).

Research Question

What needs-based strategies do successful automotive leaders use to mitigate employee skills gaps?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions in research denote researchers' opinions on certain study aspects, even without evidence or verification to support them (May & Perry, 2022). I assumed my participants responded honestly to my screening and interview questions. Furthermore, I have assumed that the participants were willing to share successful strategies regarding the topic of this study.

Limitations

Qualitative researchers must know their research studies' limitations or potential weaknesses (Sinning, 2022). Limitations might have impacted the study's transferability and reliability. A limitation when collecting primary data included difficulty recruiting participants for interviews. Other limitations included:

- The relatively small participant size may have limited the transferability of findings.
- Purposive sampling within the Canadian automotive industry context may have restricted the applicability of results to broader contexts.
- Potential bias from the researcher's leadership role in the Canadian automotive industry could have influenced data interpretation.

Transition

Section 1 of this research specified the business problem, research question, assumptions, and limitations. Section 2 provides the review of literature, incorporating ERG theory as the study's framework, and examines existing literature on automotive skills gaps and organizational strategies to enhance workforce skills. In Section 3, I explain the parameters of the pragmatic qualitative study, detailing its purpose, methodology, and the roles of both the researcher and participants. I present the findings of the study based on the qualitative data gathered from six Canadian Automotive executives through in-depth, semistructured interviews in Section 4.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review is focused on recent peer-reviewed studies (within 5 years) addressing identifying and filling skills gaps in the automotive industry while exploring the framework's concepts of existence, relatedness, and growth. I searched various databases using various keywords, some of which included *skills gaps and strategies of employee motivation, business performance, leader successful strategies, postpandemic, Alderfer's ERG Theory of Motivation,* and *automotive industry* to identify relevant literature. The databases consisted of Scopus, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Springer, PubMed, IEEE Xplore, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) JSTOR, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, White Pages, ProQuest, EBSCO, Ovid, Medline, ERIC, PsycINFO, ABI/INFORM collection, CORE, Public Library of Science (PLOS ONE) EconBiz, and Walden University DBA Research materials.

Conceptual Framework

Alderfer (1969) refined Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory into a theory of motivation with three simple concepts: ERG. The conceptual framework of this study includes these three concepts. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework

Note. *Information about theory constructs taken from "An Empirical Test of New Theory of Human Need." by C. P. Alderfer, 1969, *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 4*(1), 142–175. https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(69)90004-X . Permissions not required.

Figure 1 illustrates the alignment between ERG motivation theory and the research question, providing a foundation for conceptual clarity. The literature review supported the selection of ERG theory over alternative motivational theories by emphasizing its relevance to leadership strategies aimed at reducing skill gaps in the post-pandemic automotive industry. ERG theory explains how existence, relatedness, and

growth needs serve as key drivers of employee motivation, particularly in the context of upskilling (Harefa et al., 2025). Chung et al. (2022) demonstrated the theory's broad applicability to understanding employee motivation, encompassing basic survival, interpersonal collaboration, and opportunities for career advancement. Prior research has shown that skill gaps can negatively affect employee safety, interpersonal dynamics, and long-term professional development (Caligiuri et al., 2022; Jackman et al., 2021). Table 1 presents the relationship among the conceptual framework (Figure 1), the research question, and the 10 interview questions listed in Appendix A. This alignment tool helps ensure that the interview protocol effectively elicits data to address the research question and remains consistent with the selected conceptual framework.

Table 1

Interview Questions and Project Alignment

Interview question	Alignment to project
1,2,3	General and specific business problems
4,5,6	Specific business problem: ERG growth, employee needs
7,8,9,10	ERG theory (entirety), employee needs, and relatedness

The ERG theory, introduced by Alderfer in 1969, was developed to establish a hierarchical arrangement of human needs. The acronym ERG represents a triad of fundamental human needs: the need for existence, relatedness, and growth (Alderfer, 1969). These three needs have specific definitions within Alderfer's (1969) theory:

- Existence pertains to fulfilling the fundamental material necessities essential for human survival.
- Relatedness pertains to the inclination to uphold significant interpersonal connections.
- Growth pertains to the aspiration for individual advancement and self-improvement.

Specifically, employees are satisfied with their jobs when they have the tools they need, the social connection, and the opportunities to increase their job skills. Moreover, they feel protected and have a greater desire to work. In the next section, I examine Alderfer's ERG theory, elucidating how employees can be motivated to achieve more.

Existence

Alderfer (1969) introduced ERG theory to explain human behavior and motivation by recognizing that individuals may pursue multiple needs simultaneously. This theory highlights the importance of flexibility in addressing a range of individual needs, which is particularly relevant for workplace leadership (Badali et al., 2022). Leaders are encouraged to avoid focusing exclusively on one demographic group and instead tailor motivational strategies that accommodate diverse employee requirements (Badali et al., 2022). Supporting this approach, Xu et al. (2020) emphasized that creating satisfactory working conditions is essential for organizational sustainability. This idea also parallels Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which identifies physiological and safety needs as foundational for human survival (X. Yin & Zeng, 2020). The "existence"

component of ERG theory includes basic material and physiological needs such as hunger, thirst, compensation, benefits, and appropriate working conditions (Yamada & Teixeira da Silva, 2022). When resources are limited, individuals often face trade-offs, where one person's gain may directly affect another's opportunity (Pantouvakis et al., 2023). For example, if two people are hungry, satisfying one may result in deprivation for the other. Similarly, securing a high-paying job could mean that another individual loses out on financial advancement. Satisfaction with existence needs is often influenced by comparisons with others in similar circumstances, though these comparisons are not necessarily made with close acquaintances (Yamada & Teixeira da Silva, 2022). Hurtienne and Hurtienne (2023) argued that interpersonal elements play a minimal role in how individuals assess material needs, noting that comparisons are typically based on quantities rather than the identities or personal conditions of others. However, individuals often use interpersonal language to express these otherwise impersonal evaluations.

Relatedness

Relatedness refers to how individuals manage their social and interpersonal relationships with significant others, a core element of ERG theory (Alderfer, 1969). In interpersonal interactions, individuals strive to maintain meaningful connections with others, such as family members, friends, coworkers, and supervisors, to gain social recognition and external validation (Chen, Hansen & Cai ., 2023). Relatedness also includes the feeling of belonging and comfort within a group or familial setting (Alderfer,

1969). This psychological connection distinguishes relatedness from basic survival needs and reflects a deeper level of human motivation.

One distinguishing feature of relatedness needs is the presence of sharing and mutuality in social exchanges. Individuals often fulfill these needs by exchanging thoughts and emotions with others, unlike existence needs, which may not involve interpersonal reciprocity. In meeting relatedness needs, people seek acceptance, validation, understanding, and influence within relationships (Alderfer, 1969). Authenticity plays a critical role in this process, even though relatedness does not require a symmetrical power structure between individuals. Authentic communication fosters a supportive environment in which individuals can express themselves openly. Effective interpersonal interactions often include expressions of affection or rapport (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2023), while expressions of anger or animosity may create disconnection and emotional strain, especially when the relationship involves significant individuals (Yamada & Teixeira da Silva, 2022).

In organizational settings, relatedness involves not only social bonds but also conditions that support collaborative engagement and job satisfaction (Al-Suraihi et al., 2021). Factors such as incentives, fair compensation, and supportive workplace environments all influence employees' relatedness needs and the development of essential skills (De Bruijn et al., 2022). Kapoor (2023) emphasized the need for dynamic learning environments in corporate settings to meet employees' evolving interpersonal and professional needs. As flexible and hybrid work models become more prevalent,

innovative and personalized learning opportunities have emerged as key strategies for strengthening social engagement and professional development (Hazratkulovich, 2023). These approaches reflect the broader relevance of ERG theory by linking relatedness and growth to organizational success.

Growth

Growth needs encompass individuals' desires to enhance their well-being and positively contribute to their environment (Alderfer, 1969). Fulfilling these needs involves engaging in activities that apply existing skills and, in many cases, require the acquisition of new competencies (Girdwichai & Sriviboon, 2020). Alderfer (1969) emphasized that achieving personal fulfillment depends on addressing developmental needs, which are linked to an individual's potential for growth. Tumi et al. (2022) reinforced this perspective by asserting that individuals can only meet growth needs when given opportunities to realize their full potential. As a result, it is essential for employers to recognize and support employees' aspirations for professional development.

Employees respond positively to growth opportunities that signal the potential for career advancement and personal achievement (Tumi et al., 2022). Within the automotive industry, identifying leadership strategies that facilitate employee skill development can provide valuable insights for promoting career progression and improving organizational outcomes. Opportunities for advancement often serve as strong motivators for learning new skills. For example, Morscheck (2023) found that the desire for career progression among top managers, framed through the lens of ERG theory, significantly influenced

their performance intentions. These aspirations are closely tied to feelings of respect and recognition, both of which contribute to greater employee engagement (Khan, Khan et al., 2020).

Organizations that actively invest in employee development through training, fair compensation, and structured incentives generally see higher levels of employee satisfaction and engagement (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Tumi et al., 2022). Structured career planning initiatives have been shown to improve engagement and performance outcomes (Girdwichai & Sriviboon, 2020). In addition, factors such as the availability of incentives, expectations of reciprocal contribution, and recognition of job performance are positively correlated with employees' motivation to grow (Hongal & Kinange, 2020). These findings underscore the value of creating organizational cultures that foster growth and acknowledge employee contributions.

Needs

According to Alderfer's (1969) ERG theory of motivation, individuals are driven by three core categories of needs: existence, relatedness, and growth. Unlike Maslow's hierarchical approach, ERG theory acknowledges that individuals may pursue multiple needs simultaneously, and their prioritization may shift over time. These changes in priority reflect evolving personal goals and motives as individuals navigate different stages of life and career.

Chung et al. (2022) applied ERG theory to examine how the fulfillment of various needs influences turnover intentions among public employees. They focused on

employees who were nearing the threshold of resigning and identified which specific unmet needs were most predictive of a desire to leave. The findings indicated that when critical needs go unfulfilled whether related to survival, interpersonal relationships, or personal development, employees may become more likely to disengage or exit the organization.

In response to the evolving demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, organizations worldwide are adopting strategies to address widening skill gaps. For instance, South African enterprises have implemented workforce development programs to equip employees for future workplace dynamics (Samuel & Moagi, 2022). Tommasi et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study highlighting the critical role of education and training in preparing workers for Industry 4.0, emphasizing the need for both technical and transversal competencies. Similarly, Jankelová and Joniaková (2021) argued that highly educated individuals, especially those in leadership roles, are instrumental in identifying and communicating organizational skill disparities. Their ability to analyze, interpret, and articulate these gaps enhances the organization's readiness to respond with targeted development strategies**.**

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Skills gaps are significant in business, social science, and educational research, indicating a lack of necessary skills or qualifications for a position (Olan et al., 2022). This disparity between talents and job requirements leads to inefficiencies in the workplace (Morandini et al., 2023). Mitigating skills gaps is crucial for individual and

organizational success (Booker et al., 2022). Management evaluates skill gaps to assess work culture and integrate new practices or technologies (Betti & Sarens, 2021). In the next section, I have addressed the scholarly literature on skills gaps and discussed leadership strategies to address them, along with factors contributing to skills gaps in the automotive industry.

Skills Gaps

Skills are the tangible talents, aptitudes, and capacities individuals acquire through structured or unstructured training and are essential for competent task execution (Moreira & Rodrigues, 2023). A skills gap emerges when there is a mismatch between the skills available within an organization and those required to meet consumer demands or achieve strategic objectives (Stylianou & Pericleous, 2025). Internal skills gaps, in particular, refer to situations where employees are unable to fulfill business goals due to insufficient competencies (Meta, 2022). These discrepancies highlight the critical need for continuous skill development as a means to align workforce capabilities with evolving job requirements. In high-impact sectors such as construction, addressing skills gaps is particularly important to sustain performance and ensure operational resilience (Zaragoza-Sáez et al., 2022).

Modern employees increasingly seek technology-integrated work environments, placing a premium on digital literacy and technical fluency (Jackman et al., 2021; Waqanimaravu & Arasanmi, 2020). Failure to accurately identify and address skill deficiencies can significantly reduce organizational competitiveness (Olan et al., 2022).

Beyond individual firms, the broader economic consequences of workforce skill shortages are substantial. Governments and investors must recognize the long-term implications for economic health. Jankelová and Joniaková (2021) warned that unresolved skills gaps could contribute to a 9 percent decline in the United States' standard of living by 2030. This projection underscores the urgency of developing policies and strategies that foster skill development and address labor market needs to sustain economic growth.

Postpandemic Skills Gaps

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for rapid transformation across industries, exposing significant skills gaps within the global workforce. As organizations pivoted to remote work, digital platforms, and automation, traditional roles were redefined, and new competencies became essential (World Economic Forum, 2023). This transition has particularly highlighted the inadequacy of existing workforce skills to meet the demands of emerging business models, creating what many scholars term as a "skills mismatch"(Agrawal et al., 2020).

Canada's long-standing workforce skills gap became more urgent and visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the crisis, stakeholders had identified persistent deficiencies in workforce preparedness (Agrawal et al., 2020). The pandemic magnified these gaps and accelerated the need for reskilling and upskilling across sectors. As remote collaboration and digital tools became essential, demand surged for digital literacy, adaptability, and self-management, which are skills underemphasized in

traditional roles. The Conference Board of Canada confirmed this intensification, reporting a widening skills gap and heightened labor market vulnerability (Carlier, 2024). To remain globally competitive, experts now call for targeted national investment in workforce development.

The postpandemic environment has accelerated digital transformation across industries, leading to a sharp increase in the demand for digital competencies. Canadian companies now rely more heavily on digital tools and technologies than they did before the pandemic (Mahboubi, 2022). Hutchison (2022) reported that approximately 90 percent of occupations, including those in the automotive industry, are expected to require digital skills within the next decade. Zaidi (2022) noted that Canada faces both a labor shortage and a talent deficit as evolving business needs, particularly those driven by automation, outpace the supply of adequately skilled workers.

Effectively addressing skill gaps requires distinguishing between organizational talent shortages and broader personnel deficits. Robertson and de Aquino (2022) emphasized the need to identify hard-to-fill roles and understand their implications for organizational success. Skill gaps may stem from external shortages in the talent market or from internal issues within human resources processes (Przytuła et al., 2020). Saad et al. (2020) cautioned against placing sole blame on inadequately trained individuals, noting that broader systemic challenges also contribute to skills mismatches. Recruiting and onboarding new talent can be expensive, underscoring the need for proactive strategies. Sangar (2022) proposed several solutions to address post-pandemic skill gaps,

including upskilling, industry-aligned education, digital literacy initiatives, and measures to close the supply-demand divide in an increasingly tech-driven labor landscape.

Skills Gaps in the Automotive Industry

The automotive industry is facing a critical shortage of skilled workers due to the accelerated integration of emerging technologies and increasing demand for digital competencies. Recent studies highlight that this shortfall spans across various operational levels and is driven by the industry's transition toward electrification and automation (Carlisle et al., 2021). For instance, Pennisi (2022) warns that many workers risk displacement if they cannot adapt to these evolving skill requirements, especially as the industry continues to adopt advanced systems that rely on digital and data-driven processes. Furthermore, the competition for digitally skilled talent has intensified, as the same expertise is in high demand across multiple sectors. Zhu (2021) further emphasizes ongoing recruitment challenges, particularly in sourcing engineers and technical service personnel, which adds to the sector’s talent crisis. This widening skills gap underscores the urgent need for targeted workforce development strategies to support innovation and ensure long-term competitiveness in the automotive sector.

Within the manufacturing domain of the automotive sector, metalworking operations represent a critical area of concern. Designers in this space often encounter challenges related to material selection, balancing functionality, reliability, and cost-efficiency (Ismail, 2025; Madhavaram et al., 2024). Compounding these issues are existing skills gaps in traditional manufacturing practices, as well as limitations related to

component size and production speed (Crețu et al., 2024; Lubinga et al., 2023). These specific gaps in traditional manufacturing skill sets are a focal point for data collection in this study, as they directly influence workforce readiness and operational performance in the evolving automotive landscape.

Factors Affecting Skills Gaps

Skill gaps arise when employees lack the competencies necessary to meet role-specific requirements, affecting both productivity and labor costs (McGuinness et al., 2018). Several factors contribute to these gaps, including the retirement of experienced workers, limited soft skills development, and inadequate technical training (Ayodele et al., 2021). While the rise of automated machinery may create new opportunities, educational systems often fall short of preparing individuals for these emerging roles (Bhatnagar, 2021). Bridging the divide between education and market demand remains an ongoing challenge. Addressing the gap between educational institutions and the implementation of Industry 4.0 technologies, Azmat et al. (2020) developed a degree apprenticeship program in digital technology solutions. In the United Kingdom, the shortage of digital skills continues to impede the adoption of manufacturing digitalization, contributing to national productivity constraints. Tucker (2022) argued that effective workforce planning goes beyond filling skill gaps and requires organizations to optimize talent, experiment with work patterns, and leverage new technologies. Similarly, Ghassoul and Messaadia (2023) stressed the importance of modernizing educational

curricula to include innovation, communication, and ICT proficiency aligned with labor market expectations.

Digital technology and artificial intelligence are increasingly viewed as foundational elements in addressing workforce skill gaps. Baral et al. (2022) described them as the backbone and bloodstream of organizational functionality. Chidebe et al. (2025) noted rising concern among employers and educators about the adequacy of current and future workforce skills. In the tourism and hospitality sectors, Carlisle et al. (2021) identified specific digital competencies as essential, such as proficiency in Microsoft Office, social media, online marketing, operating systems, and online review monitoring. In Canada's luxury hotel industry, skill shortages are especially pronounced in areas requiring soft skills that are difficult to find and retain (Dimanche & Lo, 2022). Tsirkas et al. (2020) characterized these skills as encompassing linguistic competence, social etiquette, personality traits, positive outlook, and personal motivation. Other researchers have highlighted key soft skills such as communication (Babashahi et al., 2024; Lyu & Liu, 2021; Yong & Ling, 2023), teamwork (Karimi & Pina, 2021), leadership (Qwaider et al., 2024; Tee et al., 2024), problem-solving (Yeung et al., 2023), ethical conduct (Babashahi et al., 2024; Khan, Mahmood, & Shoaib et al., 2022), and the ability to work effectively under pressure (Tee et al., 2024).

Soft skills are consistently identified as critical across industries and organizational levels. Caruana and Damilakis (2022) emphasized competencies such as civility, adaptability, professionalism, a strong work ethic, and collaboration. Despite a

lack of universal definitions, the significance of soft skills in supporting organizational roles remains widely acknowledged (Almeida & Morais, 2023). Volkov et al. (2022) noted their deeply interpersonal nature, and Ntola et al. (2024) observed that they are difficult to teach through traditional means. According to Kenwright (2022), soft skills enhance employees' adaptability and effectiveness in client interactions, product customization, and conflict resolution, reinforcing their value across job roles and sectors. Strategic social media management is another area where communication and digital literacy intersect. Al-Asfour and Zhao (2024) emphasized its role in maintaining competitive advantage, while Singh and Hassan (2024) noted how data analytics enhance this impact. Pekkala and van Zoonen (2022) found that effective communication skills are increasingly important due to the rise in social media use, with Dijkmans et al. (2020) highlighting that a human tone amplifies its success. The growing volume of data presents new challenges (Imjai et al., 2024; Obermayer et al., 2022), making it essential to develop evolving skill sets for data management (Ferreira et al., 2023). When properly harnessed, these skills can improve organizational performance (Su et al., 2022), though Sung and Choi (2023) warned that skill gaps may prevent firms from capitalizing on consumer insights.

Managers across industries have reported significant gaps in communication, analytical ability, and adaptability, particularly among banking personnel (Meena & Parimalarani, 2022). Schlegel and Kraus (2023) cited widespread deficiencies in digital transformation capabilities, while Barbu et al. (2025) emphasized the importance of

digital basics such as Microsoft Office. Carlisle et al. (2021) reinforced these findings by identifying online marketing, social networking, and review monitoring as critical gaps. More advanced future-focused skills in areas like robotics, augmented and virtual reality, and artificial intelligence also face growing deficits (Pathak et al., 2023), signaling a widening discrepancy between current capabilities and future demands.

Organizational Leadership and Responsibility in Filling Skills Gaps

Organizational leaders are responsible for providing strategic directions to ensure successful execution of initiatives, programs, and broader organizational goals (Chaudhary et al., 2023; Narne et al., 2024). A safe and healthy work environment enhances employee engagement, improves task completion, and contributes to higher productivity (López-Cabarcos et al., 2022). Leaders must attend to environmental context to optimize performance outcomes (Byrd, 2022; Zhou et al., 2022). Research shows that healthy workplaces reduce absenteeism and medical costs while improving employee focus and overall work quality (Rani et al., 2022; Shipman et al., 2023; Vu et al., 2022). Beyond health outcomes, a strong workplace culture promotes flexibility and ownership, enhances corporate reputation, and improves labor selection ratios (Wu et al., 2021).

To address ongoing skill shortages, executives have implemented a range of talent strategies. These include promoting diversity and inclusion to improve workplace culture, as well as expanding entry-level hiring through apprenticeship programs and graduate trainee schemes (Ennis & Co Group, 2023; Yong & Ling, 2023). The adoption of remote and hybrid work models has also increased. Environmental factors such as workstation

cleanliness, access to tools, proper ventilation, and lighting directly affect employee performance (Maesaroh & Apriani, 2022). These elements significantly influence both individual productivity and broader organizational outcomes (Iis et al., 2022).

Leadership styles are also in managers toolkits for assisting with skill enhancement. Behie et al. (2023) emphasize that effective leadership is crucial for aligning workforce strategies with organizational goals. Transactional leadership theory offers a framework for this alignment by using systems of reward, correction, and varying levels of oversight from active management by exception to laissez-faire leadership. However, applying these models in practice is often hindered by cultural differences and the complexities of diverse workplace environments (Moore & Hanson, 2022).

Additionally, sector-specific approaches reveal the need for context-sensitive leadership; for example, in the game development industry, fostering creativity and innovation is as important as technical skill development (Loeis et al., 2023). Certification programs have also emerged as viable tools for improving workforce capabilities, especially in specialized or high-skill domains (Hutchison, 2022). These findings suggest that leadership training must be adaptable, culturally aware, and aligned with sector-specific demands to effectively address post-pandemic workforce development challenges.

The importance of reskilling and middle-skills development is also well-documented. McElheran et al. (2024) reported a 29% increase in 30 high-growth

occupations, with many requiring less than a bachelor's degree. Supporting this trend, the Yang et al. (2024) found that most of the top ten fastest-growing occupations did not require a four-year degree. Instead, alternative pathways such as certifications, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training have become essential. Recent frameworks help managers forecast future skill needs and address gaps through interdisciplinary hiring and leadership development (Kiers et al., 2022; Stark, 2022). However, environmental barriers, insufficient occupational health and safety training, and lack of bargaining power can reduce the effectiveness of workplace learning (Hauashdh et al., 2024). Mukhuty et al. (2022) emphasized the need for socially responsible HRM to address challenges in Industry 4.0, including leadership, culture, and digital readiness. A proactive management approach supports innovation, cultivates lifelong learning, and facilitates balance between human and technological capacities (Kess-Momoh et al., 2024; Moore & Hanson, 2022; Uwizeyemungu et al., 2022). In some sectors, including the Thai automotive industry, positive management-union relationships have also supported technology adoption and employee motivation during digital transitions (Juhász et al., 2023; Shu & Srimuang, 2025).

Employee Motivation

Motivation refers to the internal mental forces that prompt individuals to take action toward personal and organizational objectives. It arises from both intrinsic desires and extrinsic incentives, such as financial rewards, recognition, or advancement opportunities (Aljumah, 2023; Órdenes & Ulloa, 2024). Psychologically, motivation

explains why people act in specific ways, integrating conscious desires, expectations, and social reinforcement (Nguyen et al., 2020; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Within organizations, motivation functions as a key determinant of individual behavior and performance, shaped by internal aspirations as well as environmental cues. When employees are offered opportunities to develop new skills, their motivation and engagement often increase, contributing to both personal growth and organizational success (Putra & Ali, 2022; Salas-Vallina et al., 2021). Providing training signals that the organization values employee development, enhancing both confidence and competence (Ithnin et al., 2022).

Motivation also drives individuals to meet fundamental psychological needs and pursue career goals, which in turn strengthens organizational performance (Kurdi & Alshurideh, 2020; Matiba, 2024; Na-Nan & Sanamthong, 2020). Numerous studies confirm a positive relationship between motivation and task performance (Aruldoss et al., 2022; Iis et al., 2022; Sugiarti, 2022). In a qualitative case study of a manufacturing company's apprenticeship program, Arthur-Mensah (2020) found that stakeholder involvement and employer flexibility were crucial to retaining trainees and boosting morale. Similarly, Juhász et al. (2023) found that skill gaps encompass not only technical competencies but also soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal effectiveness. Arvanitis et al. (2022) expanded on this by identifying common soft skill deficits and strategies for improvement based on expert interviews in the Greek educational and training context.

Employers play a pivotal role in motivating employees through investment in training and development initiatives (M. W. Hurtienne et al., 2022; Yoganathan et al., 2021). In doing so, organizations must balance the need to shape workforce capabilities with the potential risk of losing trained employees to competitors (Dachner et al., 2021). Coordination with educational institutions is critical in this effort, especially when developing industry-relevant curricula and certification standards (Chen Kusimo & Cardenas-Navia, 2023; Melesse et al., 2023). However, ineffective collaboration can hinder the delivery of targeted training programs and limit the labor market's capacity to meet sector-specific demands. Hung et al. (2021) warned that a breakdown in employer-education alignment could impede skill development and contribute to organizational failure. Failure to recognize the motivational value of learning opportunities may also reduce the efficacy of coaching and training delivery (Mohd et al., 2020; Zardasht et al., 2020).

Technology can assist with employee motivation and performance management. Baral et al. (2022) and Butterworth (2022) highlighted how digital technologies, and artificial intelligence can address skill-based performance gaps while enhancing employee empowerment. These tools support immediate operational needs while also helping to attract, develop, and retain talent. Effective motivation involves not only inspiring employees but also creating the conditions for them to succeed (Afif et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2023). Jones-Carmack (2022) emphasized the importance of a conducive work environment in enabling employees to fulfill responsibilities and meet

performance standards. As Kim et al. (2020) noted, motivational strategies must be rooted in a nuanced understanding of human needs, aligning activities with both individual aspirations and organizational goals.

Business Performance

Business performance is fundamentally tied to an organization's ability to achieve strategic goals, and effective leadership is central to driving that performance. Hoerl and Snee (2020) argue that leadership effectiveness must be evaluated in relation to how well it supports business objectives. However, despite growing recognition of workforce capability as a performance driver, there remains limited research on how different levels of employee expertise directly influence business outcomes. Data from the U.K.'s National Employment Survey reveal that nearly one-third of firms were unable to introduce new products or services due to a shortage of qualified personnel (de Vries et al., 2021; Farris & Bergfeld, 2023). These shortages have led to operational delays, missed deadlines, and compromised product quality all of which undermine organizational performance (Morris et al., 2020). The situation has been further exacerbated by global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened existing skill shortages and destabilized economies across industries (Tabuena et al., 2022).These findings highlight the urgent need for organizations to invest in skill development and strategic leadership to ensure sustained business performance in an increasingly volatile global environment.

In response, many organizations have accelerated digital transformation efforts to reduce costs, enhance service delivery, and decrease reliance on manual labor through job automation (Deloitte, 2023; Murphy, 2023). While these strategies promise improved efficiency and competitive advantage, they also introduce new challenges related to workforce displacement and skill obsolescence (Parker & Grote, 2022; Sobczak, 2022). Recent findings suggest that current workforce competencies are often inadequate for the demands of an increasingly automated landscape (Jaiswal et al., 2022; KPMG, 2022; Murphy, 2023). As organizations restructure around technological change, employees must continuously reskill to remain competitive. This shift underscores the need for proactive approaches to education and ongoing professional development.

The presence and severity of skills gaps have a measurable impact on organizational performance, particularly in larger firms where the effects are magnified (Battiston, 2020). While much of the literature has focused on supply-side explanations, recent research highlights the significance of demand-side dynamics such as internal training policies and hiring practices (Caligiuri et al., 2022). Talent mismatches impose substantial economic costs by reducing innovation, productivity, and earnings at both organizational and societal levels (Hasyim & Bakri, 2024). Internally, ineffective recruitment processes may perpetuate existing skill gaps if candidate evaluations are not aligned with known organizational needs (McGuinness et al., 2018). A lack of structured internal skill audits and development frameworks often exacerbates these issues, leading companies to hire suboptimal candidates.

External labor market constraints further complicated hiring. Donovan et al. (2022) attributed persistent talent shortfalls to broader structural issues such as geographic immobility and shifting industrial demands. These external mismatches contribute to inefficiencies and, in some cases, structural unemployment. In high-tech industries such as digital manufacturing, skill requirements are especially demanding, necessitating highly flexible personnel with a commitment to continual learning and adaptation (Baral et al., 2022; Nair et al., 2023). Sector-specific challenges are particularly acute in roles involving data analytics and digital competencies, which are now essential across industries (Gupta et al., 2023; Tsirkas et al., 2020). Organizations must anticipate evolving skill demands, prioritize upskilling, and maintain agile talent strategies to remain competitive (Adepoju & Aigbavboa, 2021; Kess-Momoh et al., 2024; Velavan et al., 2021). In this context, HR professionals play a strategic role in conducting skills gap analyses and aligning recruitment and development efforts with emerging business needs (Ebekozien et al., 2022; Ismail, 2025; Razmak et al., 2023).

Summary and Conclusions

This literature review analyzed Alderfer's ERG theory of motivation, emphasizing the dimensions of existence, relatedness, and growth. It explored contributing factors to workforce skill gaps and considered how motivational theory can inform leadership strategies to support employee upskilling and identify organizational areas for improvement. The review also addressed leadership approaches for mitigating

skill gaps in the post-pandemic environment, recognizing that such gaps can arise in knowledge, technical ability, and overall performance.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced widespread shifts in workplace dynamics and labor market demands, resulting in evolving skill requirements and escalating organizational costs, including wages. The review identified a gap in the internal recognition and understanding of skill shortages, suggesting a need for further research to develop strategic solutions.

Transition

This section provided a synthesis of literature by incorporating ERG theory as the study's framework and examining existing literature on automotive skills gaps and organizational strategies to enhance workforce skills. In Section 3, I explain the parameters of the pragmatic qualitative study, detailing its purpose, methodology, and the roles of both the researcher and participants. I provide a comprehensive overview of how I conducted the study. Section 4 presents the study's findings, based on qualitative data, and offers business contributions, recommendations for professional practice, implications for social change, suggestions for further research, and conclusions.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In Section 3, I outline the plan and parameters of the pragmatic qualitative study, detailing its purpose, methodology, and the roles of both the researcher and participants. I provide a comprehensive overview of how I conducted the study.

Project Ethics

This study was conducted in line with the requirements and oversight of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (approval number 06-28-24-1019376). The research followed ethical guidelines outlined in *The Belmont Report*, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and well-being were prioritized throughout the study.

As the sole researcher, I served as the primary instrument of data collection, responsible for conducting semistructured interviews and analyzing participants' lived experiences. My professional background includes 12 years in the automotive industry, with experience as both a senior manager and Director of Human Resources. While my expertise provided valuable context, I remained aware of potential bias. I engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the process to monitor how my experiences and assumptions may influence participant interaction, data interpretation, and theme development (see Lim, 2025). I also employed triangulation and member checking to enhance credibility and minimize subjective distortion (see Creswell & Poth, 2016).

At the start of the interview process, I introduced myself, explained the purpose and procedures of the study, and provided participants with an informed consent form. Participation was strictly voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. No financial or material incentives were offered. All participant identities were protected using pseudonyms, and any identifiable details were masked to ensure confidentiality. Data will be stored securely on a password-protected external hard drive for 5 years, after which it will be permanently deleted in accordance with Walden guidelines.

To ensure ethical protection, I implemented procedures to protect participants' rights and dignity at every stage of the research. These included establishing clear withdrawal procedures, maintaining confidentiality, and upholding data security protocols. The informed consent process, confidentiality measures, and all data management strategies align with IRB and Belmont Report principles.

Nature of the Project

The pragmatic qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as it allows for collecting and comparing rich data through in-depth interviews and document reviews, as Ramanadhan et al. (2021) outlined. The pragmatic approach permits gathering diverse data types. The pragmatic qualitative approach aligns with using leader interviews' transcripts and secondary documentation sources to better understand skill gap reduction strategies in the automotive industry. Pragmatic research strives for real-world findings that have practical application in industry (Ramanadhan et al., 2021).

Population, Sampling, and Participants

To support the purpose of this project, in which I explored how Canadian automotive leaders have addressed postpandemic skills gaps, I purposively selected six participants who met specific criteria aligned with the study's focus. These individuals were at least 30 years old, held high-level or executive positions within the Canadian automotive sector, had a minimum of 5 years of industry experience, and had managed employee skills gaps. This targeted population ensured that the data collected directly informed the central research question. Given the narrow and specialized population, I also employed snowball sampling to expand access to additional qualified leaders, as recommended in similar qualitative research contexts (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). This dual approach supported both relevance and feasibility in participant recruitment.

Participants were identified through publicly available information on company websites and LinkedIn and through my professional network. I then sent electronic invitations from a recruitment script approved by the Walden University IRB. Following initial interest, I sent informed consent forms and offered to answer any questions about the process. Lim (2025) and Van Hoe et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of building trust and rapport in qualitative inquiry, which I prioritized by maintaining transparent communication, responding promptly to inquiries, and meeting with each participant prior to interviews to review expectations and reinforce confidentiality protections.

The sample size of six participants was justified by the principle of data saturation, which occurs when no new themes emerge from ongoing data collection (Ahmed, 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025). Saturation was assessed through iterative data analysis in collaboration with my chair to ensure conceptual depth without unnecessary redundancy. The concept of "information power" (when enough data is collected to answer the research questions) guided the decision to stop recruitment (see Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 28). Participant selection was intentionally aligned with the project's objectives, ensuring that all voices represented in the data possess the authority and experience necessary to illuminate strategies for closing skills gaps in a post-pandemic context.

Data Collection Activities

As the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews supported by document review to gather rich, contextual insights from Canadian automotive leaders. Semistructured interviews allow for open-ended yet guided conversations, offering both consistency and flexibility across participants (Tisdell et al., 2025). An interview protocol ensured coherence while still enabling probing follow-up questions tailored to each leader's experiences. This protocol, developed to align with the study's purpose, provided a thematic framework to reduce variability and interviewer bias while supporting detailed exploration of strategies used to address post-pandemic skills gaps. The interview questions, including prompts and follow-up strategies, are provided in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom at times selected by participants for convenience and privacy. Before each session, I reviewed the informed consent form, reaffirming voluntary participation and confidentiality. Each interview was recorded using both Zoom's built-in recorder and an external backup device to ensure data preservation. This dual-recording process, recommended by Edwards and Holland (2020), safeguarded the accuracy of data capture. I also made field notes during and after each session to record nonverbal cues and initial impressions. Participants were made aware of the recording process in advance to promote transparency and comfort.

Document review supplemented the interviews by providing background context and validating participant statements. As noted by Walker et al. (2024), this method adds depth by capturing publicly accessible organizational information that is not always evident through conversation alone. To enhance the reliability and validity of this process, I employed member checking after interviews by sharing transcripts with participants for review and clarification, as recommended by Tisdell et al. (2025) and Meydan and Akkaş (2024). I also practiced regular reflexive journaling to mitigate personal bias and remain aware of my positionality throughout the study (Ahmed, 2025).

Interview Questions

Open-ended interview questions, as advocated by R. K. Yin (2018), are employed by researchers to gather extensive participant information. Unlike closed-ended questions that prompt yes or no responses, open-ended questions encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, providing insights into each situation's what, how, and

why. I developed a conceptual framework (Figure 1) to guide the creation of 10 open-ended interview questions, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and facilitating comprehensive data collection. See Appendix A for the full protocol used during interviews. Interviewees were invited using the form in Appendix B. The following questions were asked during the interview process:

1. What needs-based strategies do automotive leaders use to successfully mitigate skills gaps in their employees, postpandemic?
2. What are the most critical skills gaps that affected the workforce in the past year?
3. How have critical skills gaps affected the workforce?
4. How have you mitigated skills gaps postpandemic?
5. How did the pandemic impact the skills gaps?
6. How do you motivate workers to acquire new skills?
7. How do your employees respond to your different motivation strategies?
8. Given the skills gaps, how do you improve workers' overall business performance?
9. In the context of motivation, there is a hierarchy of needs that includes existence, relatedness, and growth.
10. How do you satisfy one's complex needs with more primitive desires to mitigate skills gaps postpandemic?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

To manage and organize data throughout this qualitative study, I employed several systems to ensure accuracy, consistency, and traceability. I maintained a detailed research log to document each interaction with participants, track interview scheduling, and record observations, following guidance from Tisdell et al. (2025). Each Zoom interview was labeled with a distinct participant code (e.g., P1, P2) to preserve anonymity and maintain organization throughout the process. Field notes and reflective journaling were used to capture my impressions during and after interviews, supporting emerging understandings and aiding reflexivity. Audio recordings were transcribed using Zoom, and transcripts were stored on a password-protected USB drive, with all physical documents secured in a locked safe. All data will be securely stored for 5 years before permanent deletion or shredding.

Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), provided the analytical framework for this study. This method was selected for its capacity to uncover recurring patterns within qualitative data and its compatibility with a constructivist approach. I followed their six-step process, beginning with familiarization through repeated readings of transcripts and culminating in the interpretation of themes through a structured approach to coding and pattern recognition. Initial codes were drawn from common terms, concepts, or sentiments found in participant narratives and organizational documents. These codes were refined and clustered into categories, which

then gave rise to broader themes that directly aligned with the study's research questions and conceptual framework.

All data analysis was completed manually without the use of qualitative software to ensure full engagement with the material and preserve analytic ownership. I organized the data using proprietary coding in spreadsheets and created visual maps to explore relationships among themes. I integrated the secondary steps suggested by Minh (2025), including a model of description, analysis, and interpretation, which provided a systematic structure for translating raw data into meaningful findings. Quotations from participants were used to illustrate key insights and are presented in narrative or tabular form to reinforce the analytical process.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, I incorporated member checking by sharing transcribed interviews with participants for verification, as recommended by Tisdell et al. (2025). I also engaged in ongoing self-reflection to minimize researcher bias, consistent with Ahmed's (2025) guidance. The themes identified were correlated with existing literature and updated studies as appropriate, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in both empirical evidence and the evolving academic discourse. This approach supported a rigorous and credible process for identifying actionable insights from the lived experiences of Canadian automotive leaders.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

This qualitative study ensured dependability through comprehensive data evaluation and interviews. Employing various data collection methods, as R. K. Yin (2018) suggested, such as note taking and interviews, enhanced the study's robustness. Triangulation, as highlighted by Lim (2025), was used to ensure that multiple data sources confirmed results. Transcript cleaning and review, member checking (Tisdell et al., 2025) as detailed in Appendix C, and a data log also lent to dependability.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research is established through confirmability, transferability, and credibility, which often intersect during data and analysis validation (Ellis, 2021; Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility ensures trustworthiness and believability within the study's context, validated through member checking and research logs (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). Transferability denotes the relevance of findings across diverse contexts, supported by direct participant quotations (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). Data saturation procedures ensure findings remain pertinent to the study, further bolstering validity. Using generic qualitative research methodologies had the potential to introduce biases stemming from the unique experiences of the participants' lifestyles. Every participant received an email containing their transcription, which they were asked to review and verify for accuracy in order to establish trust. In relation to member checking, participants were provided with their interview transcripts to verify the absence of flaws

or inconsistencies. Phone and email were used to make any necessary modifications or revisions to the interviews. Credibility pertained to the degree of trustworthiness and assurance that the data reported in the study were plausible (Ellis, 2019; Stahl & King, 2020).

I ensured credibility by verifying the information with participants based on my observations of the collected data. Transferability referred to the relevance and applicability of the data. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), it is the researcher's responsibility to provide readers with a detailed account of the participants and the study procedures so that they can make informed judgments. In Section 4, I provide comprehensive details and explanations of the results to support future qualitative research, adding to the study's credibility.

Confirmability requires the researcher to ensure that findings are grounded in actual data rather than subjective opinion (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I achieved confirmability through triangulation, ensuring that the findings reflected the participants' perspectives. Additionally, I adhered to ethical standards, followed the interview protocol, and utilized data analysis tools to analyze the data objectively. I employed Braun and Clarke's (2022) definition of "information power" (p. 28) to determine data saturation, meaning that sufficient data had been collected to answer the research question. By addressing these aspects, the study enhanced the validity and rigor of the qualitative process, fostering confidence in the transferability of its findings to similar populations.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I outlined my role as the researcher and provided a comprehensive description of the research strategy and methodology, including population and sample characteristics. I justified the selection of a qualitative, pragmatic approach and addressed ethical considerations. Moreover, I detailed the data gathering tools, methodology for data collection, strategies for data organization, and challenges related to ensuring trustworthiness in the study.

In Section 4, I present and interpret the study's findings, elucidate their implications for professional practice, and discuss the potential contributions to social change. I have provided recommendations for actions based on the findings and suggested avenues for future research to explore the identified themes further. Finally, I have offered a personal reflection on the research process and concluded the study, summarizing key insights and emphasizing the study's significance in advancing knowledge in the field.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of the Findings

In this section, I presents the findings of the study based on the qualitative data gathered from six Canadian automotive executives through in-depth, semistructured interviews. The section's main purpose is to address the research question: "What needs-based strategies do automotive leaders use to successfully mitigate employee skills gaps?"

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to examine the viewpoint of experienced industry professionals to address this question. This approach allowed for an organized but adaptable analysis of trends across participants' narratives. The participants held executive or senior-level positions within the Canadian automotive industry; therefore, each had direct involvement in workforce development, employee training, and business recovery efforts.

Data were collected through Zoom-based interviews, and the ensuing transcriptions generated using Zoom transcriptions feature were manually coded and analyzed, without the use of external software. Inductive coding practices were used for thematic development; codes were identified from data rather than being predefined. I also engaged in member checking (see Tisdell et al., 2025), reflexivity (see Braun & Clarke, 2022), and progressive memo writing to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness. Four main themes emerged from the analysis,

- Upskilling for technology as a strategic response to change.

- Skill gaps and talent flow in the evolving automotive workforce.
- Motivation leads to retention in the post-pandemic workforce.
- Learning partnerships as a long-term talent development strategy.

Each theme is presented in the section supported by direct participant quotations and linked to relevant literature and theoretical framework. A summary of the coding process is provided at the end of the section to highlight the overall contribution to the research question

Participants Demographics

This study involved six participants (P01 through P06), all of whom were executives in the Canadian automotive sector who had direct control over or improvement in employee performance, training, and workforce development. Participants were purposely selected based on their active participation in forming strategic human resource decisions and their experience in addressing postpandemic skill gaps. All the participants met the inclusion criteria, holding at least 5 years of professional experience in the automotive sector, working in a leadership capacity, and contributing to postpandemic skill-development and performance enhancement efforts.

The participants represented a range of organizational sizes, family-run leaderships, major regional chains, and nationwide service networks. They held diverse executive-level roles, including senior service manager, dealer principal, senior service manager and operational director. They ranged in age from 30s to mid-60s and

collectively offered over 90 years of combined experience in automotive management and workforce leadership.

The diversity of their institutional context provided a broad and complex viewpoint on the strategies employed to deal with postpandemic talent development, upskilling requirements, and workforce challenges. Although exact demographics identifiers (such as age, gender, or company names) are not disclosed to maintain confidentiality, participants' identities are referred to numerically (e.g., P01, P02) throughout the findings chapter.

Table 2

A Summary of the Participants' Selection Characteristics and Roles

P#	Title	Experience	Workplace	Responsibilities
P01	Senior operations manager	15+	Regional multibrand dealer	Training, performance systems and operations
P02	Head of human resources	20+	National dealership group	Motivation strategies, recruitment and reskilling
P03	Service department lead	12+	Midsized urban dealership	EV integration, training and staff retention
P04	Dealer principal	25+	Family-owned franchise	Fatigue management and organizational culture
P05	Talent development consultant	10+	Automotive service network	Upskilling programs and newcomer integration
P06	Executive director, operations	15+	Technical and compliance unit	Partnership development and training innovation

Table 3

Summary of Final Themes and Focus Area

Theme	Title	Central focus
Theme 1	Upskilling for tech as a strategic response to change	Reskilling of employees through digital tools, stimulation, and micro credentials
Theme 2	Skill gaps and talent flow in the evolving automotive workforce	Addressing burnout, recruitment barriers, and experience loss
Theme 3	Motivation and retention in the post-pandemic workforce	Recognition, individual motivational strategies, and career growth
Theme 4	Learning partnerships as long-term talent development strategy	Building pipelines through colleges, community engagement and government support.

Overview of the Thematic Analysis Process

The interview data were analyzed using the six-phase framework for reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021, 2022). This method allowed for rich and sophisticated interpretation of participants' experiences and organization practices, and it was a well-suited approach for a qualitative, pragmatic inquiry design.

Phase 1: Familiarization With Data

I started by transcribing the interviews and going over each one several times. Analytical memos were written during this stage to record initial impressions, identify recurring words or ideas, and highlight any changes in emphasis, tone, or emotional expression. Participants' descriptions of leadership techniques, employee reactions, and

the interaction between policy and practice were given consideration. Documenting researcher interpretations, presumptions, and preliminary coding possibilities, field notes and reflective journaling aided in the familiarization process.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

I methodically examined each transcript line by line using a manual semantic coding technique. Words, phrases, or narrative passages that were pertinent to the research question were given codes. Both surface-level behaviors (like "EV training" and "mentorship structure") and more abstract ideas (like "emotional burnout" and "cross-functional adaptability") were included in the original codes. The coding procedure was flexible and iterative; as new transcripts were examined, the codes were rearranged and improved. To stay close to the data, coding was done by hand without the use of any external software.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Following the coding of every transcript, related codes were compiled into more general candidate themes. To answer the research question and provide logical categories of meaning, the researcher started to find recurrent patterns among the participants during this phase. These trends included both common tactics (like simulation-based training, inclusive hiring, and recognition systems) and common problems (like staff burnout and digital skill gaps). To capture the richness and diversity of larger thematic groupings, the researcher also started to make notes on possible subthemes.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

To verify internal coherence, consistency, and clarity, candidate themes were compared to the entire dataset. Overlapping themes were clipped to cut down on repetition, and other themes collapsed or divided as necessary. To make sure they accurately represented the participants' voices and backed up the thematic claims, data extracts were reexamined. The ability of the themes to address the research question and to reflect a range of organizational contexts and strategies was assessed.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

To reflect their central insights, the finalized themes were given precise names and definitions. To aid in interpretation, each theme incorporates pertinent literature, participant quotes, and supporting subthemes.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The research question guided the structure of the thematic report, which balanced participant narrative, analytical interpretation, and theoretical background. Quotations from participants were chosen to reflect both similarities and differences in perspective, and identifiers (P01–P06) were employed to ensure confidentiality. In keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2021) focus on subjectivity and transparency in thematic analysis, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the process to record decision-making and researcher bias.

Discussion of the Themes

The following sections present the four key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the participant interviews. Each theme shows a different but related way that Canadian automotive leaders dealt with skills gaps and workforce issues after the pandemic, supported by participant quotes. When appropriate, academic literature is used to back up or challenge the points of view that are shared by the participants. Relevant subthemes are provided, in addition, to present more granular strategies.

Theme 1: Upskilling for Technology

Automotive leaders came up with the idea of reskilling and upskilling employees to deal with changes in the workforce and technological disruptions after the pandemic. This was especially important with the rise of electric vehicles (EVs), diagnostic software, and hybrid sales processes. This finding supports recent research that says companies that focus on building their employees' skills are better able to adapt to changes in the market. For instance, Mehta (2024) stressed how important it is to have upskilling programs in fields where technology changes quickly. In addition, management strategies in the automotive and manufacturing sectors after the pandemic stress that retraining not only improve technical skills but also boosts morale and keeps employees (Heines, 2023). In this study, participants consistently referred to the introduction of EVs, and other technological advancements as catalyst of reskilling.

> We had to reskill our whole floor when we introduced EVs. It wasn't just service staff, it was advisors, even people at reception. Everyone had to understand the new system at a basic level, or they couldn't support the workflow. (P03)

P03 explained that training was not just for technical roles; it was for everyone in the organization, including customer-facing and operational teams. P04 also talked about how the way people learn has changed. "We now use simulation tech to train before hands on you get a full EV walkthrough digitally, diagnostics, safety, shutdown procedures, before you even touch the car." (P04). These kinds of strategies show that people are relying more and more on training environments that are driven by technology and lower the risk of accidents. This trend is in line with the fact that digital tools are becoming more common in operations and learning after the pandemic. This way of thinking is backed up by research on how to integrate digital learning. Simulation-based upskilling makes it much easier to remember information and stay safe in high-complexity jobs. According to Heines (2023), learning management systems (LMS) increases completion rates and reduces training costs, particularly in sectors with rotating shifts or varied staff schedules.

P06 mentioned the use of an internal training system that helps in standardizing upskilling. "Our LMS covers technical compliance and safety modules, self-paced with quizzes built in. We launched it during the pandemic and never looked back." This quote aligns with changes in the industry toward modular, self-directed learning that lets companies train more people without slowing down work. This finding confirmed Costa

et al.'s (2024) explanation that self-paced LMS programs help people finish their training and lower the cost per trainee, especially in fields where staff members work different hours or shifts.

Certification and Performance Incentives

Several participants talked about how giving employees formal recognition of their skills, like through certification or performance-based bonuses, made them engaged and accountable. P06 made the performance alignment very clear, stating that "EV knowledge was not optional, so we tied it to our bonus structure. If you wanted to qualify for your quarterly incentive, you had to pass the training module." This showed a mixed approach that combines motivation and skill development, based on the ideas of performance management. P05 explained how useful stackable credentials are in a place where people leave jobs often: "Microcredentials helped our team level up without stepping away from work." P04 added further perspective by noting, "We had one advisor go from reception to senior tech within a year just by completing the in-house modules. It kept him driven." Researchers such as Gauthier (2020) described stackable micro-credentials as a strategic tool for upskilling without requiring formal academic leave, particularly beneficial in industries marked by high turnover and fast-changing technologies. These insights all point to a multilayered way to improve skills and maintain long-term employee engagement.

Theme 2: Skill Gap and Talent Flow in the Evolving Automotive Workforce

Data also revealed that the skill gaps are getting more complicated and that the way talent is hired and kept in the Canadian automotive sector has changed since the pandemic. Participants explained that these gaps are caused by both technological changes, like the rise of electric vehicles and digital platforms, and structural changes in the workforce, like burnout, early retirements, and the problems with traditional hiring methods. “We had to reskill everyone on our floor when we brought in EVs. The older techs just didn't know how to use diagnostics or hybrid systems” (P03). P06 also mentioned digital disruption, saying, “Selling online was a big change. A lot of staff members didn't know how to talk to each other or use technology well enough for that” (P04). Participants explained that the rapid changes created problems, like burnout and turnover. “People got tired quickly, especially the older ones. We weren’t ready for early exits” (P04). P02 said, “We began hiring from places like Best Buy instead of automotive schools.”

The departure of older workers led to a significant loss of valuable sales and communication skills in the workforce. P02 stated,

> We lost the people who were experienced and knew how to upsell during service... the kind of advisors who could explain options to a customer without sounding like they were selling. It takes time to learn that, and those people are gone. (P02)

P02's highlighted that some skills, such as intuitive customer communication and effective upselling, are developed over time and cannot be easily replaced through technical training alone. The institutional knowledge and natural sales strategies that long-term employees developed were crucial to the business, and their sudden exit, often due to skills gap-related burnout, left noticeable gaps.

These insights emphasize the need for reskilling programs to address not only technical abilities but also interpersonal and experiential skills that departing employees took with them. When the remaining people could not deal with being overburdened with new work, P04 stated that, "We had to let some of them go early or take a break because they just couldn't handle it." These results are in line with Frey and Jinnett (2024) that people in technical and service-oriented jobs get burned out, their productivity goes down, their turnover goes up, and their skills fade over time. P05 gave a more personal example of how organizational empathy can help in the short term:

> We almost lost a tech because he was burned out. He had been working nonstop for 6 months, but then he just stopped coming in. We let him take 2 weeks off without any consequences. He came back better, but it was close. (P05)

External hiring restrictions, in addition to internal loss, also affected the flow of talent. Participants explained they were using nontraditional and inclusive hiring methods to fill gaps quickly. P02 said, "We began hiring from places like Best Buy instead of automotive schools. We needed people who knew more than just engines." (P02)

Flexibility in hiring, such as what P02 described, means that the industry is becoming open to people with a wider range of skills. Instead of focusing on traditional mechanical experience, they are looking for people who are adaptable, customer-focused, and good with technology. Secondary data confirmed this to be true. The Canadian Center for Diversity and Inclusion (2024), in a research report, showed that companies that hire people from all backgrounds tend to have more flexible workforces and be able to innovate over the long term.

Participants also said there was a gap in digital readiness, especially in sales and customer service roles. The move to hybrid and online selling showed that staff members had trouble with communication and using new technology. P01 said: “Some of our guys were literally selling cars from their living rooms, and they had no training in how to use digital tools or communicate online. It was not very professional, but it was all we had.” This confirms Tsipursky’s (2025) finding that almost 60% of front-line workers in retail and service sectors do not have the right digital tools or training to do their jobs well in remote or hybrid settings. Within the larger issue of skill gaps and talent flow, two important subthemes regarding burnout and nontraditional hiring emerged.

Burnout Recovery Strategies. Burnout emerged as a shared concern among participants, but several described specific retention strategies aimed at preventing long-term attrition. P04 explained that although mental health breaks were not a formal policy, the team offered brief rest periods to preserve valuable experience and relationships: “We gave them short breaks to rest and recharge… We would lose 6 or 7 years of experience

and relationships if they left." These leader-driven interventions reflected a flexible, empathetic response to emotional exhaustion rather than adherence to rigid protocols. This aligns with Gallup's (2025) conclusion that informal flexibility can significantly improve retention following periods of crisis. Reinforcing this idea, P05 noted, "He got better after that t2-week break…That costs us less than hiring and training someone new." These narratives illustrate how timely, reactive recovery strategies, even outside of formal HR systems, can reduce turnover in high-skill environments where institutional knowledge is difficult to replace.

Inclusive and Nontraditional Hiring. Traditional ways of hiring were not meeting demand, many participants shared ideas that included making hiring criteria more flexible and getting more people involved in the community. P06 said, "We worked with a local nonprofit to hire people from groups that don't get enough attention, like young people, newcomers, and people who had never worked in the field before. It was different, but it worked." P02 backed this up by saying that having tech skills became more important than having a background in cars. These insights show a shift from hiring based on experience to hiring based on skills, with a focus on soft skills, tech fluency, and adaptability. Deloitte's recent work (2023) supports this by suggesting that industries that are having trouble finding talent should use broader pipelines and community-based recruitment.

These subthemes show that leaders in the automotive industry are not only finding problems, but also coming up with creative, targeted solutions. While not always

formalized, these practices show a change in how people manage their workforces, focusing on care, flexibility, and openness when things go wrong. The overall theme exhibits that there are many reasons for skill gaps in the automotive industry, including the fast pace of technological change and big changes in how people move through the workforce. Burnout, early retirement, not being good with technology, and a lack of talent pipelines have made the job market one that needs more than just reskilling; it needs a new way of thinking about workforce strategy at the system level.

Theme 3: Motivation and Retention in Post-pandemic Automotive Workforce

This theme shows how Canadian automotive leaders have dealt with the problems of keeping and motivating skilled workers after the pandemic. Participants stressed that employee motivation is no longer just about pay, but also about recognition, opportunities for advancement, rewards based on performance, and the culture of the organization. P02 emphasized the importance of visibility and recognition: “It’s not just money. We use newsletters, shoutouts, and internal awards to make sure people feel seen.” Similarly, P03 described how growth pathways inspire commitment: “We promote from within, when someone finishes the training series, we give them a new title and responsibilities. It shows them there’s a future here.” This is especially important now that turnover rates are higher, burnout is more common, and expectations for the workforce are changing. This fits with what other research have found about what motivates people to work after a pandemic: intrinsic rewards and career development are more important than external rewards. Towers Watson (2023) showed that companies that offer employees real

chances to grow and regular praise do a better job of keeping employees than other companies.

Alderfer's (1969) ERG theory emphasized that growth needs play a critical role in long-term employee motivation and satisfaction. Recognition and performance advancement, as seen in participant responses, directly fulfill these growth-oriented needs and encourage sustained engagement within the organization. Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory also says that recognition, achievement, and responsibility are three of the most important "motivators" for keeping employees happy in the long term (Nickerson, 2025). P02 discussed, "Recognition is important, whether it's through newsletters, promotions, or shout-outs. In the past, we would just give a bonus and move on. We stop now and make a big deal out of people doing well." P02's comment shows a change from transactional to relational motivation, where financial rewards are used along with symbolic and public forms of appreciation. P05 talked about how career advancement was directly related to employee motivation and long-term engagement. "People stayed because we offered more than just money; we showed them how to grow. They could see the future here."

Growth-oriented incentives, such as those described by Alderfer (1969) were part of the overarching discussion. For example, P03 discussed how internal promotions affect things like receiving leadership roles and promotions that stop employees from leaving. These strategies show that companies try to keep skilled workers by giving them opportunities to grow, not just by giving them bonuses or raises. Motivation was also

built into the systems for giving feedback on daily operations. P01 said, “We linked bonuses to how well mentors did their jobs. You got credit if your mentee did well. It made people really help each other.”

Strategic ways to encourage desired behavior through peer accountability and rewards based on performance were observed. According to Mahato and Kaur (2023), these kinds of systems can boost not just retention but also teamwork and productivity when they are linked to recognition. Participants also agreed that traditional motivators were no longer enough in a world after the pandemic. P02 said, “No matter how good a company is, if the pay isn't good, people will leave.”

Two things can be observed from the discussion: first, nonmonetary incentives are becoming more important, but they need to be paired with fair and competitive pay to keep people loyal. There were three main subthemes that came out of the larger theme of motivation and retention. These subthemes show how automotive leaders moved away from transactional incentives and toward more employee-centered engagement models that are flexible enough to work with a workforce that has changed since the pandemic.

Recognition and Visibility. Participants held the narrative that symbolic recognition, like public praise, employee features in internal newsletters, and peer acknowledgment, were powerful motivators that had an emotional effect. These kinds of praise not only made people feel like they belonged, but they also helped to reinforce the values and behaviors that were expected at work. P06 talked about how personalized

thank-you notes from leaders boosted morale: “Even a direct message from the VP on Slack or Teams means a lot. People feel like they matter, even though it's easy.”

These findings are like Gallup’s (2025) results, which showed that employees who get regular praise are four times more likely to be engaged and 56% less likely to look for new jobs. Participants also said that these kinds of actions were low-cost, high-impact practices that did not require much investment but had big effects on morale and commitment. Recognition also spread to systems run by peers. P01 expressed his thoughts about how mentoring relationships were made official and linked to recognition. This led to a culture of shared responsibility, where employee growth was not only measured but also celebrated.

Pathways for Career Growth. Career advancement became a second major motivator, especially for keeping mid-career technicians and advisors. Participants stressed that visible, achievable chances for growth were more motivating than just money, especially in an industry where promotions were moving away from seniority-based models and toward merit- and skill-based ones. P03 mentioned, “They were given leadership and promoted. That stopped them from leaving.” P05 went into more detail:

> We didn’t always promote people based on how long they had been there. We gave promotions based on how much people learned and grew. That made a difference for them. They thought they were making progress, and not just stuck.

McSilver (2025) published the *2025 LinkedIn Learning Report* showing that 93% of employees would stay longer at a company that invests in their careers. These internal

mobility practices are in line with this report. According to leaders in this study, policies that promote employees from within the company led to lower turnover, higher employee engagement, and more opportunities for skill development.

P02 talked about how important it is to set up learning milestones. “We broke development down into steps. You can become a team leader after you finish your EV certification. People are motivated by the fact that it is predictable.” This quote shows how micro-progression models are becoming more popular. These models link skill acquisition to internal mobility, making a clear and motivating path for advancement.

Tailored, Inclusive, and Motivation Strategies. The emergence of personalized motivation strategies, where leaders consciously changed how they led their teams to fit the differences in age, culture, and role, may have been the most complex subtheme. Participant 6 said, “Some of the younger people on our team cared more about getting certifications than getting bonuses. Some people wanted more time with their families or more freedom. We try to ask instead of assuming.”

Planned flexibility shows a move toward employee-centered engagement, recognizing that the same strategy may not work equally well for all groups of workers. For instance, new immigrants who were hired often wanted stability and guidance, while younger digital natives who were hired wanted to learn new skills and have flexible work hours. P04 talked about how burnout response strategies could be a source of motivation, “Letting people take breaks when they needed them instead of punishing them made people want to stay. They felt like they were being treated with respect.”

Deloitte's 2023 Human Capital Trends report stated that these kinds of caring practices are a key part of keeping workers after the pandemic, especially in high-pressure, service-oriented fields (Durme et al., 2023). In a few cases, leaders talked about getting rid of incentives that worked for everyone and moving toward models that were more flexible and open to everyone. "We used to have one way to give bonuses. Now we offer a mix of things. Some people want their tuition paid back, while others want shorter hours. We let teams help plan what is important to them" (P05). This responsiveness not only helped keep employees, but it also made the company's culture stronger because employees felt heard and valued.

Theme 4: Learning Partnership as Long-Term Talent Development Strategy

A fourth theme that came up in the data of the participants is the strategic use of learning partnerships to deal with ongoing talent shortages and fill skills gaps that will happen in the future. Leaders in the automotive industry stressed that relying only on hiring and training people from within was no longer enough. Instead, they started working with schools, community groups, and government programs to create talent pipelines that would last for a long time. These actions are part of a larger trend in workforce development that sees collaboration between industry, academia, and government as necessary for making sure skills stay relevant in the future.

According to the OECD (2023), partnerships between employers and education providers increase alignment between labor market needs and graduate capabilities. Organizations like, Future Skill Centre (2022) in Canada actively promote these kinds of

models to help the economy recover and the workforce change after the pandemic. Participants said that partnerships helped fill both gaps in entry-level talent and the need for reskilling. P03 said, “The HR team worked with colleges to get new hires. We hired interns, but we also helped them plan their lessons so that they fit our needs.”

This active role in shaping educational content shows a change from hiring people passively to actively developing talent. Instead of waiting for the perfect candidates, participants wanted to put their needs directly into local learning systems. This point was made stronger by P06:

> We work with a technical school that is close by. They send students to work with us, and we usually hire them after that. We also talk to their advisors and tell them what tech they should cover, like how to use diagnostics or the basics of electric vehicles.

A two-way model in which businesses give education providers feedback from the real world so that graduates are ready to work from day one. It was also said that government involvement could help make access and inclusion more widespread. P05 said, “We got some help from a provincial program to train new people. We held workshops, and some people stayed full-time. It was also great for connecting with other people in the community.” The above programs are in line with Canada's Employment and Social Development policies, which support work-integrated learning and open pathways to employment, especially for groups that are not well represented (Baichoo et al., 2023).

Overall, participants saw learning partnerships as more than just a way to improve their public image; they saw them as a key part of workforce development that would help them build future capacity while also helping the community and making education more relevant. Within this theme, three related subthemes came up that show the different kinds of learning partnerships that participants used to fill skill gaps and create long-term hiring models.

Educational Partnership. This level of cooperation shows that the relationship between industry and academia is changing in a deeper way, moving from transactional placements to co-created learning pathways. Employers are no longer just waiting for graduates to come to them; they are now actively involved in shaping the outcomes of education. This makes sure that training is relevant to the real world and speeds up the process of getting new employees up to speed. Participant 6 added:

> The local polytechnic sends us the students twice a year. We test them out during coop, and if they are good, we offer jobs. But we also give feedback to their instructors such as the type of tech tools they should be covering.

These kinds of reciprocal agreements are in line with Universities Canada (2024), which says that work-integrated learning (WIL) not only makes students more ready for jobs, but also helps the economy grow in the area by keeping talent in the community. Participants also said that internships helped people remember things better. “When they have already worked with us during school, they settle in faster. They know the shop culture and are more likely to stay” (P03). This suggests that WIL fosters stronger

employer-employee connections and reduces onboarding time, increasing the likelihood of long-term employment. These benefits reinforce the value of structured experiential learning programs in building a sustainable and locally rooted workforce

Government Collaboration. A second important subtheme was the use of government-funded programs to help with hiring, training, and building a more diverse workforce. Several people said they were able to hire and train people from a variety of backgrounds, including newcomers, youth, and people who were underemployed, by getting provincial and federal grants, wage subsidies, and programs that help people get ready for work. P05 said: “We hosted workshops with government support, for newcomers and single parents. Some needed more help adjusting but they were motivated and loyal.” These partnerships not only help with staffing needs, but they also help with social impact goals by aligning business goals with bigger public policy goals. McDonough and Richter (2025) stated that the partnership between employers and the government is important for getting rid of systemic barriers to access and updating job training. P04 discussed using wage subsidies to lower the risks of onboarding. “The subsidy let us take a chance on someone with no auto experience. There was an employee, we trained her internally, and she became one of our most dependable advisors.” The use of wage subsidies by P04 showed alignment with McDonough and Richter’s comment about reducing systemic barriers.

In addition to hiring help, participants used funded upskilling programs to help current employees keep up with training on EVs, diagnostics, and digital platforms. “We

used a federal grant to upskill our advisors on new compliance software. That saved us time and gave our team more confidence" (P06). These results show that employers who are dealing with rapid tech-driven change need public-private cooperation, not just for their own sake. Government and business are becoming more and more co-investors in labor development, rather than working alone.

Community Integration and Social Recruitment. People also talked about their connections with nonprofit community organizations and the programs that help people get ready for work. They were used to find workers in groups that were often thought of as young people, newcomers, and people looking for a second career. As Participant 4 said, "We partnered with community agency to bring in youth who didn't have formal training but were really sharp with tech we trained them in house and kept most of them". Grounded in a skill set where attitude and potential are considered just as important as academic qualifications. Hancock et al. (2022) says that the community-based pipelines help companies find hidden workers and make their workplaces more diverse and welcoming. Participant 2 agreed with this by saying, "When someone comes through a local program, they feel invested. They're not just working for a paycheck; they're building a future for themselves." Participants also mentioned that getting involved in the community helped the brand's reputation, trust, and visibility in the area, which are all becoming more important in a competitive job market.

Themes Within the Literature

This study explored the needs-based strategies Canadian automotive leaders used to address skills gaps in the post-pandemic labor market. Using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, I identified four main themes that reveal a multifaceted response to workforce shifts, technological advancement, and evolving employee expectations. This section discusses each theme in relation to the research question, existing literature, and broader implications for leadership, learning, and workforce development.

Theme 1 highlights the growing importance of structured training systems, simulation-based learning, and peer mentorship as the sector adapts to rapid technological change, particularly with the expansion of electric and hybrid vehicles. Participants emphasized that post-pandemic digital acceleration left some roles underprepared. In response, organizations implemented in-house certifications, peer-led tech mentoring, and learning management systems (LMS) to support upskilling while maintaining service quality. These findings align with literature emphasizing flexible training models in response to automation and digitization (Lertpiromsuk et al., 2022; Lund et al., 2021). Participants' preference for hands-on simulation over classroom instruction reflects a shift toward experiential learning, consistent with Kolb's theory and with current thinking on aligning training with both cognitive development and job demands (Devi & Thendral, 2023).

Theme 2 addresses workforce instability resulting from burnout, early retirements, and the technical limitations of legacy staff. Participants noted that emotional fatigue had become a long-term barrier to talent retention. To preserve institutional knowledge, some leaders introduced informal sabbaticals and micro-recovery strategies. Simultaneously, they moved away from traditional hiring pipelines and adopted more inclusive recruitment practices to access untapped labor pools. These approaches echo recent findings on postpandemic service work and the rising importance of emotional labor and talent scarcity (Betti & Sarens, 2021; Booker et al., 2022). The emphasis on adaptability, digital comfort, and soft skills as hiring priorities is consistent with current research (Ayodele et al., 2021; Badali et al., 2022). Participant efforts to diversify hiring and engage local communities support equity-centered workforce models that open high-skill roles to nontraditional candidates (Sangar, 2022).

Theme 3 reflects a shift in retention strategies away from financial incentives toward value-driven motivators. Leaders stressed the importance of public recognition, individualized career paths, and flexible motivators that accounted for generational differences. While compensation remained relevant, participants consistently emphasized the role of visibility, growth, and purpose in promoting long-term commitment. These findings align with Alderfer's ERG theory, which identifies recognition and advancement as intrinsic motivators (Galanakis & Peramatzis, 2022). They also support leadership literature emphasizing adaptive leadership and employee-centered engagement as keys to retention in evolving industries (Azmat et al., 2020). The intentional use of personalized

recognition supports Gallup's conclusion that appreciation and career development are strong predictors of loyalty (Bhargava et al., 2025).

Theme 4 highlights how companies partnered with colleges, government agencies, and community organizations to develop talent pipelines. Educational partnerships included curriculum consultation and co-op placements. Government collaborations supported training and wage subsidies for newcomers. Community-based engagement expanded access to underrepresented groups and fostered local talent. These initiatives reflect a shift from reactive hiring to proactive workforce shaping. Rather than relying on externally trained labor, participants described actively contributing to vocational education systems. These strategies reinforce the growing importance of work-integrated learning (Ghassoul & Messaadia, 2023) and public-private collaboration for workforce sustainability (Kiers et al., 2022). Leaders' involvement in curriculum design further illustrates a desire to align institutional education with employer expectations.

Across all four themes, several cross-cutting patterns emerged. First, leadership agility the ability to implement adaptive strategies rapidly was consistently identified as essential in responding to disruption. Second, leaders placed increased emphasis on emotional intelligence, particularly in mitigating burnout and designing inclusive motivators. Third, workforce development was not framed as a cost but as a long-term investment. Participants reported that prioritizing training, flexibility, and recognition resulted in sustained improvements in performance and loyalty.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

This study offers actionable insights for business leaders addressing postpandemic workforce challenges, particularly in technical sectors undergoing digital transformation. The findings emphasize that Canadian automotive leaders are responding to labor disruption through coordinated strategies in reskilling, motivation, and inclusive talent development. These results align with previous research highlighting the necessity of a multi-faceted approach to workforce sustainability in complex environments (Battiston, 2020). While focused on the automotive industry, the strategies discussed are transferable to other service and technical fields experiencing similar gaps in labor readiness and retention.

A key contribution of this study is its confirmation that structured, needs-based upskilling programs are now central to operational continuity. Participants described the successful implementation of in-house training systems using simulation tools, peer mentoring, and LMS-integrated certifications. These findings reinforce the importance of job-embedded learning models for knowledge retention and skills transfer (Caligiuri et al., 2022; Susanto et al., 2023).

In addition, the study shows that effective motivation strategies now extend beyond compensation, with participants emphasizing recognition, career development, and emotional support as essential for retaining talent. This aligns with Alderfer's ERG theory, which highlights growth needs as an important aspect of long-term motivation and satisfaction needed in employee recognition. These findings also reflect a broader

shift toward engagement models that prioritize employee visibility, psychological support, and individualized growth pathways (Kim et al., 2020). The study also provides clear evidence that inclusive hiring practices such as social hiring and community partnerships are not only ethical but also strategic, supporting prior literature on skills-based employment and workforce diversification (Ebekozien et al., 2022; Kehoe et al., 2022; Silva, 2025).

- Business leaders seeking to strengthen workforce sustainability based on these findings should consider the following actions:
- Invest in modular, scalable in-house training systems using simulation, digital certifications, and peer mentoring to support rapid technical upskilling.
- Design recognition and growth pathways that include visible advancement, leadership development, and personalized motivators to increase retention across generational cohorts.
- Adopt inclusive recruitment models by forming partnerships with community organizations and removing unnecessary credentialing barriers to widen and diversify talent pipelines.

Taken together, these strategies represent an adaptive, employee-centered framework that organizations can apply to navigate current and future labor disruptions. This study affirms that the integration of targeted learning systems, inclusive hiring, and

value-based retention practices contributes directly to long-term workforce stability and organizational resilience.

Implications for Social Change

This study holds meaningful implications for social change, extending beyond organizational leadership and human resource practices. Exploring the strategies Canadian automotive leaders used to address post-pandemic workforce challenges, the research highlights how businesses can actively promote economic inclusion, skills equity, and employee well-being.

A central social contribution lies in improving equitable access to skill development and career advancement. Participants reported working closely with underrepresented groups such as newcomers, non-degree holders, and second-career seekers through community partnerships and government-supported programs. These strategies address systemic employment barriers and open pathways into high-skill sectors for individuals who might otherwise be excluded. Prioritizing skills-based hiring and removing rigid credential requirements, leaders fostered a more inclusive labor market.

The findings also suggest that employee mental health and well-being have become core elements of postpandemic leadership. Participants implemented sabbaticals, flexible motivators, and empathetic management practices that emphasized psychological safety and personal growth. These practices reflect broader trends in workplace well-being research, which call for human-centered organizational design beyond traditional

productivity metrics (Azmat et al., 2020; Bhargava et al., 2025; Galanakis & Peramatzis, 2022). Supporting employee wellness not only benefits individuals but also contributes to family stability and community cohesion.

Furthermore, the study shows that learning and development can serve as support for upward social mobility. Internal career ladders, training-linked advancement, and accessible certifications enabled employees to grow professionally without leaving their communities. This approach challenges conventional career models and creates new pathways for individuals, especially non-degree holders and mid-career changers to advance meaningfully within their organizations.

Finally, the findings reinforce that businesses are more than economic actors; they are essential contributors to systemic transformation. Automotive leaders who partnered with educational institutions and government bodies played a role in reshaping workforce development, co-creating curricula, influencing funding priorities, and generating social value. This collaborative model supported national goals related to labor equity, pandemic recovery, and economic resilience. The leadership strategies identified in this study reflect a shift toward a more inclusive, sustainable, and human-centered professional landscape. By hiring inclusively, investing in learning, and leading with empathy, businesses can become agents of long-term social change (Devi & Thendral, 2023).

Recommendations for Further Research

Study offered valuable insights into how Canadian automotive leaders addressed skills gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it also identifies several areas where further research can deepen understanding and extend the applicability of the findings. These recommendations are intended to support scholars and professionals aiming to explore workforce development, leadership practices, and organizational adaptability in changing labor markets.

One clear area for future research is the replication of this study across different geographic regions and industries. While this research focused on the Canadian automotive sector, other industries such as healthcare, logistics, or manufacturing also face ongoing workforce disruption. Comparative studies across countries with varying labor laws, training systems, and cultural contexts could provide a more comprehensive view of how workforce strategies are shaped and adapted in different environments.

A second recommendation is to adopt longitudinal research designs that examine how workforce strategies, such as upskilling, motivation systems, and hiring practices affect employee retention, engagement, and organizational resilience over time. The present study offers a snapshot based on leadership perspectives at a single point. A longitudinal approach could capture evolving patterns and reveal whether leadership interventions lead to sustainable results as market demands and technologies shift.

Future studies should also incorporate employee perspectives. While this research focused solely on leaders, including employee voices would offer a fuller picture of how

training and motivation are experienced at all organizational levels. Mixed-method approaches that combine managerial insight with employee feedback could enhance the depth and balance of future findings.

Additionally, quantitative research could validate and extend these findings by testing the impact of specific strategies such as mentorship, simulation-based learning, or micro-credentialing on key outcomes like turnover rates, productivity, and job satisfaction. Such research could help establish benchmarks and assess the generalizability of the practices identified in this study.

It is also recommended that researchers further refine and apply Alderfer's ERG theory within contemporary workforce contexts. This study showed that growth-related needs, such as recognition, advancement, and personal development, are central to employee motivation postpandemic. ERG theory, which groups needs into existence, relatedness, and growth, offers a useful framework for understanding how these needs operate in hybrid workforces and fast-evolving industries. Future theoretical development could integrate ERG concepts with emerging trends in digital learning, emotional labor, and inclusive workforce planning.

Finally, interdisciplinary approaches combining insights from human resource management, adult education, and organizational psychology could offer a richer understanding of how leadership strategies influence both organizational performance and employee well-being. By expanding on the themes identified in this research, future

studies can help industries undergoing technological and demographic change develop more inclusive, sustainable, and responsive workforce strategies.

Conclusion

This qualitative capstone project explored how Canadian automotive leaders responded to workforce skill gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with six senior leaders and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic approach. Four themes were identified: targeted upskilling for emerging technologies, shifts in workforce composition and talent flow, evolving retention strategies, and cross-sector learning partnerships. While the findings suggest that some leaders are experimenting with adaptive and inclusive workforce strategies, these approaches appear localized and may not reflect widespread organizational change. This study provided a contextual snapshot of leadership responses during a period of disruption and highlights potential strategies for organizations seeking to navigate similar workforce challenges.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What needs-based strategies do automotive leaders use to successfully mitigate skills gaps in their employees, postpandemic?
2. What are the most critical skills gaps that affected the workforce in the past year?
3. How have critical skills gaps affected the workforce?
4. How have you mitigated skills gaps postpandemic?
5. How did the pandemic impact the skills gaps?
6. How do you motivate workers to acquire new skills?
7. How do your employees respond to your different motivation strategies?
8. Given the skills gaps, how do you improve workers' overall business performance?
9. In the context of motivation, there is a hierarchy of needs that includes existence, relatedness, and growth.
10. How do you satisfy one's complex needs with more primitive desires to mitigate skills gaps postpandemic?

Appendix B : Invitation to the Study

There is a new study about Effective Strategies for Mitigating Skills Gaps in the Automotive Industry that could help business leaders better understand mitigate the skills gaps in the automotive industry. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences learning about Skills Gaps and mitigating skills gaps through effective strategies. The automotive industry was chosen based on proximity, location accessibility, and due to the automotive industry skills gaps issues that is plaguing all of Canada and the automotive industry as a whole.

About the study:

- One 30-60 minute phone interview that will be audiorecorded (no videorecording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Leaders from the automotive companies within Canada shown to have demonstrated success in addressing skills gaps postpandemic.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Neil Shah, a DBA student at Walden University. Interviews will take place on Zoom from April to May 2025.

Please reach out neil.shah@waldenu.edu to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Appendix C: Interview and Member Checking Protocol

Actions by Me	Script/Comments by Me
Introduce the interview and set the stage. Introduce myself and the purpose of the interview thereby setting the stage.	Hello, my name is Neil Shah. I am a Doctoral Candidate with Walden University. The purpose of this interview is to identify and explore needs-based strategies do successful automotive leaders use to mitigate employee skills gaps. I am going to ask you nine questions to which I would like your responses to. Then, I will conclude the interview. Do you have any questions?
Watch for nonverbal cues. Paraphrase the participant response. Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth	Interview Questions: 1. What needs-based strategies do automotive leaders use to successfully mitigate skills gaps in their employees, postpandemic? 2. What are the most critical skills gaps that affected the workforce in the past year? 3. How have critical skills gaps affected the workforce? 4. How have you mitigated skills gaps postpandemic? 5. How did the pandemic impact the skills gaps? 6. How do you motivate workers to acquire new skills? 7. How do your employees respond to your different motivation strategies? 8. Given the skills gaps, how do you improve workers' overall business performance? 9. In the context of motivation, there is a hierarchy of needs that includes existence, relatedness, and growth. 10. How do you satisfy one's complex needs with more primitive desires to mitigate skills gaps postpandemic?
Wrap up the interview thanking participant.	Thank you for participating in the interview, an integral part of my research project.
Member Checking. Explain I will email a summary of the interview along with their transcript and allow them a week to send me any potential changes or additions they may consider important for clarity.	I will email you in about a week to schedule a time for us to review the accuracy of my interpretations of your interview responses. I will share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question. I will give you 1 week to respond with comments, questions, or further ideas and feedback. I will provide you with a final copy of the approved capstone, as well.