

Future of Work & Learning



Using a coalition model to future- proof workplaces and communities

April 2021

About the coalition

The Waterloo Region Future of Work & Learning Coalition began as an informal conversation in 2019. Today, we are a community of employers, employees, academia and government dedicated to future proofing our workplace.

Learn more at
communittech.ca/futureofwork

Thanks to our partners

Capstone partner



Executive partners



Titan partners



Associate partners



Community building partners



How did we get started?

The Future of Work started as a conversation within Communitech's Corporate Innovation (CI) team. Our larger customers (many of whom would later be founding partners of the Waterloo Region Future of Work & Learning Coalition) were starting to grapple with themes around changing workforce expectations, the emergence of a need for new workplace skills, and new ways of working. What could the future employer/employee dynamic look like? How could employers be proactive and respond to these changes positively? And, with fundamental shifts in workplace demographics on the horizon, what will the future workforce expect from employers?

In reflecting on these questions and this opportunity, our CI team came to the conclusion that these challenges were a market opportunity; employers of all shapes and sizes would soon need answers to these questions. It was also a time-sensitive opportunity as the 'future of work' was rapidly becoming the 'present of work.' Communitech has a long history of convening and collaborating, so we leveraged this approach to help our clients work together to solve common workplace challenges.

One of our corporate partners, Manulife Financial, was interested in driving this conversation forward. With contributions from Deloitte and the University of Waterloo, the Future of Work (FoW) Series was launched. The intent was to position Waterloo Region as a test-bed for new and innovative talent initiatives. Between January and April 2019, Communitech held three events positioned around [how workers adapt to change](#), [generating community conversations around change](#), and [equipping employees for the jobs of tomorrow](#).

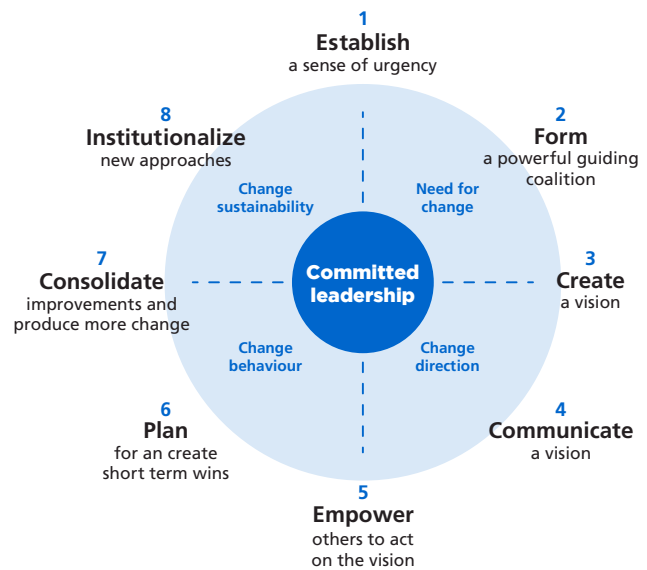
These three events culminated in a [Manulife-hosted workshop](#) at Communitech's 2019 True North Conference, which explored the notion of creating grassroots complex adaptive coalitions (see Annex A), a term coined by Pulitzer Prize-winning political commentator and True North keynote speaker, Thomas Friedman. It was this workshop that led the soon-to-be-founding members of the Coalition to understand the scale of the opportunity at hand – building a regional coalition of like-minded partners could create change that would lead to healthier workplaces and a more resilient community. It would also be the first community coalition to focus on the future of work in Canada.



Participants at the Taking Community Action workshop at True North 2019.

These events were purposefully delivered to replicate the first step in John Kotter’s [8-step process for leading change](#): Create a sense of urgency. A model originally built to enact organizational change, we adapted it to lead community change.

Why Waterloo? The Region is a globally-ranked tech ecosystem, has a track record of future-forward ingenuity (we invented search, the smartphone and blue-bin recycling), and boasts hundreds of innovative companies that will continue to invent the future in everything from robotics to AI and human-computer interaction. We respect and encourage diversity, curiosity and collaboration; we make big bets on science, tech, creativity and innovation; and we do it together to create a better community, country and world. All of these elements coalesce to make Waterloo Region a natural fit for this initiative.



Building our Coalition – January to November 2019

An important component of building an effective coalition is bringing together a group of partners who are not only interested in change, but are willing to drive it. They must also be representative of the local ecosystem, ranging from higher-education institutions, to local governments, to employers of all sizes. Communitech’s Business Development team met with organizations who had expressed interest in the FoW series, using partner briefs to outline the coalition’s purpose, problem statement, goals and path forward. These initial discussions eventually led partners to agree to one-year sponsorship commitments. It took roughly eight months to identify potential founding partners, pitch the coalition model and sign 18 partners. Selecting partners is a difficult process and, when building a partner coalition, those who understand that their engagement will

yield long-term benefits should be top-of-mind (those participating for branding benefits or short-term outcomes will always be difficult to keep engaged when difficulties arise).

LESSON LEARNED:

Partners with an enlightened self-interest understand that while their organizations will benefit from the outcomes, there is also significant value to be gained by other partners or the broader community. These organizations will have an established track record of investing time and money within a community and are concerned with its long-term prosperity. Partners should embrace the adage, “a rising tide lifts all boats.”

The 19-partner Waterloo Region FoW&L Coalition was officially [launched in November 2019](#), achieving the second step in Kotter’s model: Build a guiding coalition. Many of the early considerations that went into building the coalition were outlined in a white paper authored by Manulife, titled [Future-proofing the Canadian workforce](#).

After publicly announcing the coalition, the first order of business was to establish a clear governance structure (see Annex B) to guide the strategy and activities of the group. In hindsight, special attention needs to be given to which organization or resources will be tasked with being the backbone team, a critical component of any coalition. This is the group that will be responsible for keeping momentum going when the coalition faces headwinds that causes activity and enthusiasm to wane.

LESSON LEARNED:

Having a dedicated backbone team is essential to the coalition’s success. Much like a startup, the coalition had limited operating funds, but an abundance of work to be done. Leading the backbone team were Communitech team members who had only a portion of their time dedicated to building and supporting the Coalition’s activities. Ideally, funding should be secured for two to three full time employees to lead strategy, build additional partnerships, support the coalition’s projects and activities, and provide administrative support functions.



Coalition members and guests at the official FoW&L Coalition launch.

Creating a Shared Purpose – December 2019 to January 2020

Next, the backbone team sent a survey to the coalition partners to determine which future of work themes and topics were of most interest to the group. The topics presented to the coalition were those identified by the community in the previously mentioned True North workshop as having the broadest applicability to Waterloo Region. This ensured that the challenges to be addressed by the coalition would also be pain points experienced by the community at large.

The short survey had five questions:

1. What are shared community priorities you would like to see the coalition focus on?
2. Does your organization have existing projects under way that could be considered 'future of work and learning' that the coalition could support and amplify? Please provide a brief description.
3. Does your organization have deep expertise in an area that the coalition could leverage?
4. What future of work and learning topics do you think the coalition should focus on in 2020?
5. What metrics for success are important to your organization to maintain commitment beyond the coalition's first year?

The results of the survey (indicated by green stars in Annex C) were a good balance of people-centric and employer-centric themes.

LESSON LEARNED:

Build a common agenda. A coalition should be based on solving a shared challenge or seizing an opportunity for the benefit of all. It's hard to build a coalition without a shared purpose and without stakeholder buy-in. It helps to have a concrete issue for each partner to rally around, creating an enduring vision of what brought the partners together. It is even more powerful if this common agenda affects a wider audience than just the coalition partners.

As the coalition and its purpose began to take shape, an important element of tying the partners together was crafting a common strategic vision. The final version points to the need for a community-based response, something a coalition is best served to address:

"The FoW&L is a complex challenge for countries, governments, communities, academic institutions, organizations, and individuals that requires swift action and no single stakeholder can solve this on their own. How might a community work together as a community adaptive coalition to respond to and get ahead of these trends for the overall benefit of its stakeholders to build healthy workplaces and resilient communities?"

This clarifying message to focus a coalition's efforts is the third step in Kotter's model: Form a strategic vision and initiatives.

LESSON LEARNED:

Writing a shared vision was a helpful first step in bringing the coalition together and narrowing its focus, but at the same time we lacked a common definition of the scope of the 'future of work.' Almost one year later, we're building a solution – the FoW&L Community Readiness Scorecard. The scorecard will resemble a self-assessment survey that tracks data and information across all key areas of FoW&L, with responses being framed in terms of maturity of each factor. The scorecard can then be deployed on an annual basis to measure improvements and highlight new areas to focus on.

Managing Expectations, Clarifying Responsibilities – January to March 2020

After selecting the key themes the coalition would collaboratively explore, working groups were established to manage the activities that would be undertaken. Each partner was asked to choose which topic area was most relevant to their organization, with those especially eager to drive outcomes volunteering for the role of working group lead.

The coalition established working groups based on the following priorities:

1. How might we promote work integrated learning?
2. How might we help workers mid-career with continuous learning?
3. How might we help employers understand the changing expectations of early-career workers?
4. How might we redesign leadership and workplace practices to adapt to remote/hybrid? * *New due to Covid-19*

Volunteers working collaboratively rather than competitively, to solve challenges. While this approach has been typical of Waterloo Region's culture, building collaborative models can be

less challenging when the problems being solved are system-wide or are so complex that no single organization can realistically solve them alone.

Working groups are an effective model as they leverage the individual strengths of each partner to achieve a set of shared goals. Where one partner may encounter barriers due to their organization's size or industry, other members of the working group might be able to help address these issues. Together, this diverse group of partners will achieve shared outcomes that will benefit a good portion of the coalition.

In working collaboratively to achieve a set of pre-defined outcomes, working groups address the fourth and fifth steps in Kotter's model: Enlist a volunteer army and enable action by removing barriers.

Assigning working groups is easy compared to asking volunteers to roll up their sleeves and get to work. Deloitte supported the coalition in creating mandate letters (see Annex D) for each working group, committing members to outcomes on behalf of the coalition – a

social contract between all the volunteers and partners. These letters outline the key activities and outcomes that each working group will undertake over a given period of time (typically one year).

It can be difficult holding volunteers accountable in such an environment, so mandate letters are recommended to help working group leaders exert a small amount of authority.

LESSON LEARNED:

Each partner must have a good grasp of what is expected of them as partners in the coalition – in terms of both contributions and time (ie. how often you will meet, how long each meeting is, who will contribute what, what resources each member will bring to their working group). A good way to achieve this is by having the working groups write mandate letters which outline their activities, roles and outcomes on an annual basis. This is especially important for accountability.

In December 2019, the coalition launched the FoW&L newsletter to share articles, best practices, news and events. It's a relatively inexpensive way to build a community, though it does require the focus of someone from the backbone team for several hours a month (depending on the frequency of release). The newsletter currently has more than 1,700 subscribers from Waterloo Region and abroad. In addition, the coalition launched the FoW&L Peer to Peer (P2P) group in April 2020 and currently has 169 members. This P2P group explores how the future of work and learning landscape is changing and ways in which individuals, organizations, academic institutions and governments are going to have to adapt. Participants find these groups incredibly helpful as they will

typically inhabit relevant functional roles within their organizations.

These activities addressed the sixth step in Kotter's model: Generate short-term wins. To build momentum and demonstrate the feasibility of the coalition, it was important to show tangible results quickly. Not only is visible success important to build momentum, but it's also critical to maintain buy-in and optimism among the other coalition partners. Ultimately, coalitions will have a mix of partners that can dedicate varying levels of resources, so these successes are the glue that keeps the partners together and drives the vision forward.

Momentum, Stability and Our COVID-19 Pivot – January 2020 to Spring 2021

The coalition's first announcement in January 2020 was a partnership between Communitech and Wilfrid Laurier University [on a year-long secondment](#) – one of Laurier's employees would split her time between the two organizations. Laurier was interested in the secondment due to their interest in considering "the future of learning" and what additional credentials could be offered to both new and returning students beyond the existing degree or diploma programs. By supporting the work of the coalition, Laurier would have the opportunity to be close to work that was being done in this area, building connections in the local community. For Communitech, the secondment would support the coalition's activities as a member of the backbone team, providing much-needed resourcing and capabilities. This partnership was a great way to start the year as it was not only a quick win, but it also showed that the coalition would incorporate FoW&L practices into its activities.

In March, the Province of Ontario announced it would be funding another partnership between Communitech and Wilfrid Laurier University to support mid-career workers, called [A Framework for Future-proofing Communities](#). The partners began piloting a new training model, which provides mid-career learners with rapid training in skills that are in high demand by local employers. The model begins by teaching fundamental concepts delivered in a sprint training format, offered by the [Communitech Academy](#). It is followed by a more in-depth, immersion learning

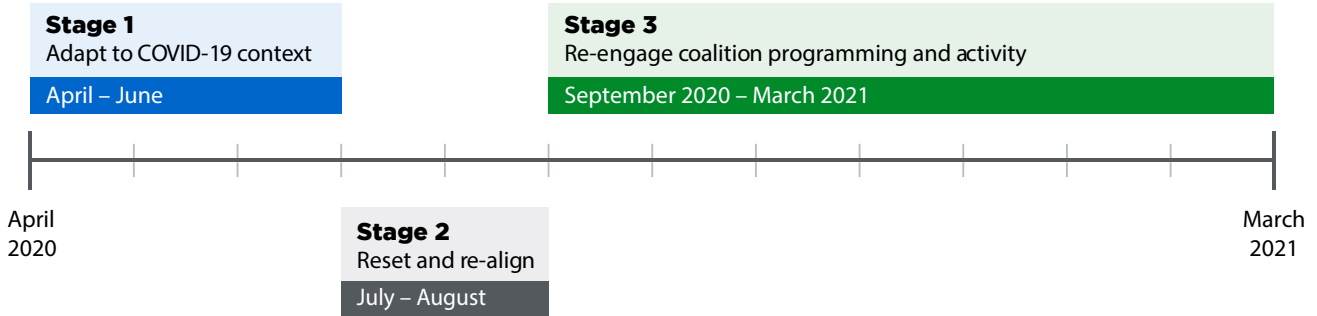
format, delivered by Laurier's Office of Continuing Education. Laurier's immersion learning condenses a semester-long, for-credit course into six weeks through a combination of in-class and hands-on learning. Communitech and Laurier selected sales and communications as the first two in-demand skills to be piloted.

This training program is noteworthy because it demonstrates the strength of the coalition model: Two partners leveraged their own strengths to remove barriers and address a key challenge facing employers and the workforce in Waterloo Region. In addition, the coalition fully intends to open source this framework, making it available to educational institutions and training providers across the world.

While the coalition was busy building momentum, a dramatic global shift threw its plans into the air – the COVID-19 pandemic caused a realization that the 'future of work' instantly became the 'now of work.' The coalition's strategy quickly shifted to remote-first delivery and made the partners re-evaluate what the strategy and outcomes would look like for Year 1. An initial pause allowed the steering committee to restructure coalition activity in April 2020, marked by three stages:

1. Adapt to COVID-19 context – virtual delivery led by the backbone team to continue momentum while giving the coalition time to rethink priorities.

2. Reset and re-align – coalition member discussions to understand commitments and resourcing; gain a better understanding of what was still possible.
3. Re-engage coalition programming and activity – with an understanding that activities would be virtual-first, continue planning and delivering coalition programming.



LESSON LEARNED:

An important characteristic of a community that is future ready is the ability to be responsive to one’s environment. The pandemic created a set of circumstances that forced a fundamental shift in the way the coalition was able to deliver on activities. For the duration of this shift the backbone team played an essential role in keeping communication lines open and setting a path forward.

Virtual delivery began in April 2020 when the [“Future is Now”](#) series was launched, eventually spanning 14 webinars (at the time of writing) and featuring speakers like [Patty McCord](#) (previously Chief of Talent at Netflix), [Heather McGowan](#) (author of *The Adaptation Advantage*), [Stephen Harrington](#) (Director, Human Capital, Deloitte), and [Jeremy Auger](#) (Chief Strategy Officer, D2L). To date, the series has over 4,000 attendees.

COMMUNITTECH
Future of Work & Learning
 The Future (of Work) Is Now:
 Special Edition with Patty McCord

“Great teams are made when every single member knows where they’re going and will do anything to get there.”

Reset and Re-Align Coalition Priorities – September 2020

During this period, the coalition participated in a Deloitte Greenhouse Lab session to identify priorities and build consensus on a path forward (falling under the “reset and re-align” phase). Given the shift due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the working groups and mandate letter activities originally established in Phase 3 were reviewed by the entire coalition through prioritizing activities. Each originally suggested activity was considered by the coalition, assessing whether it was a critical venture for the group in the current COVID-19 context, if it would provide meaningful impact within the Region and whether it could be adequately resourced and executed within the next six months. Following two virtual afternoon sessions, the coalition agreed to execute two streams of key priorities for the remaining months of Year 1.

Outreach & Communications

1. Continue the [newsletters and monthly webinars](#), and [Future of Work & Learning P2P Network](#) (led by Communitech).
2. Move forward with planning the FoW&L Summit in a new format (led by Communitech). Open-sourcing the coalition’s insights and knowledge continues to be important, so we decided to continue planning a virtual summit to share learnings with others.

Pilot Projects

3. Continue delivering the Framework for Future-proofing Communities project (co-led by Communitech and Wilfrid Laurier University).

4. Move forward on the initiative that allows everyone to align behind a common priority – Redesigning Remote and Hybrid Work (co-led by Communitech and Manulife). This emerged as a priority for all coalition members, so this common priority was taken up by a working group.
5. Build and refine a FoW&L Community Readiness Scorecard and explore adjusting it to align with the needs of organizations in the coalition (co-led by University of Waterloo and City of Waterloo).

A deeper view of pilot projects

Subsequently, the coalition began planning and executing the Redesigning Remote and Hybrid Work project – both a timely initiative given the pandemic, and another method of bringing the coalition together around a shared opportunity. The question the coalition posed to kick off the project was, *“How might we accelerate the pace of coalition partners’ transformation to a remote and hybrid workplace by convening a diverse set of organizations across sectors to systematically collaborate using a common framework to share existing practices and new interventions focused on increasing productivity and improving well being?”*

The coalition would adopt a community-of-practice model to find the best ways to plan, deliver and embrace remote work. Coalition partners would gather at regular intervals to share insights and best practices from the perspective of both employers and employees. The project

will run until June 2021, at which point a white paper will be released publicly that catalogues all of the best practices, insights and lessons learned. Our hope is that organizations across Canada will be able to leverage the white paper to improve their own remote work policies.

Another initiative that will be completed by Spring 2021 is the creation of a FoW&L Community Readiness Scorecard. This initiative resulted from coalition conversations where partners were interested in being able to assess whether or not the coalition's activities

were having a positive impact on Waterloo Region. In Summer 2020, the coalition hired two student researchers to create an initial scorecard that would measure all elements of the FoW&L in a region on a maturity scale, alongside a white paper that would teach users how to best use and understand the scorecard. After the initial scorecard was presented, the members of the Research Working Group made some refinements and updates that would ensure a diversity of opinions went into the scorecard's calculations.

LESSON LEARNED:

As the coalition's activities began to ramp up, we realized that we weren't able to track our activities' impact on the local community. As a result, the scorecard was created to benchmark, year over year, the impact of the FoW&L Coalition on Waterloo Region.

Switching to virtual delivery gave the coalition time to reset its priorities during a time where such a partnership would be at risk of failing. During this period of uncertainty, the coalition managed to achieve the seventh step in Kotter's model: Sustain acceleration. The coalition was able to maintain momentum through virtual delivery, while also implementing a big pivot to maintain larger projects that would have practical value to employers.

The Path Forward (February to March 2021)

With so much uncertainty, how does the coalition move forward? Does it retain the same structure? Who will lead it, and how will consensus be reached?

To continue moving forward, the coalition is taking a two-pronged approach based on our lessons learned: First, we will create an advisory board for the Region of Waterloo to help inform its FoW&L and talent strategy, embedding FoW&L as a key pillar within the region's talent strategy. Secondly, Communitech will adopt a challenge/ collaborative approach to common problems and focus on driving specific learnings/ outcomes through the [Future of x](#) platform (see below). The future of work will

constantly be evolving, and the coalition intends for Waterloo Region to continue to stay ahead of the curve. Economic recovery depends on creating an ecosystem where the most innovative companies can find a home alongside the world's most adaptable workforce. In the near future, we envision three areas where the coalition intends to play a role.

- 1. Regional advisory board and FoW&L Community Readiness Scorecard.**
As a collection of employers from industry, academia, not-for-profit and government, the coalition will provide advisory support to local governments that are implementing policies that will prepare Waterloo Region for the future of work. The coalition will use the scorecard that was created from late 2020 to early 2021 to give partners an on-the-ground assessment of opportunities and barriers to workforce growth. Using the scorecard as a basis for the coalition's advisory work incorporates the insights of all partners, in addition to tracking progress over time.
- 2. Continue to build momentum by engaging audiences virtually.**
Many of the activities that were run virtually throughout 2020 required fewer resources to execute than anticipated. The shift to virtual events has made it easier for the coalition to reach new audiences locally and abroad. We will continue to find areas where collaboration makes sense and to disseminate information as broadly as possible, and we will continue to share our community's progress, evolution and learnings around the FoW&L.
- 3. Communitech's 'collaborative' programming model.**
Where the interests of several partners intersect, Communitech can provide support through the creation of a collaborative program called the "Future of x" (where x can be any industry, sector or technology). These cross-sector collaboratives follow a model that explores the joint challenge, defines the key problem, finds a workable solution, tests the solution in a live environment, then conducts a wrap-up to document learnings and promote adoption.
- 4. Continue to build partnerships to advance the future of work in Canada.**
In late 2019, Communitech's FoW&L team [presented the FoW&L Coalition model](#) at the [Canada's Tech Network](#)¹ bi-annual hub meeting. Subsequently, leaders at organizations in Halifax and Windsor expressed interest in establishing partner coalitions in their regions. Within one week of each other, [Volta \(Halifax\)](#) and [WeTech \(Windsor\)](#) hosted future of work events to build momentum in their own communities. Understandably, they have encountered strong headwinds during the pandemic, but continue to explore how the Waterloo Region model could help them become more resilient.

¹ The Canadian Digital Media Network (CDMN) completed a rebranding exercise in March 2021.

This approach aligns directly with Kotter's eighth step: Institute change. This step requires taking all the learnings and changed behaviours and ensuring they become institutionalized in one form or another. It's important to consider that instituting change is not limited to one geography. In fact, it's imperative that we share our learnings with others to spark progress. Part of building a resilient community is establishing connections with others and learning from their unique circumstances, adopting their best practices to continue the cycle of learning.

Reflecting on the Pandemic & Other Final Thoughts

As the coalition was building its strategy for 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality for Waterloo Region and the rest of Canada. March 5 marked the first confirmed case of COVID in Waterloo Region, marking the start of a new way of life, and a more deliberate shift in the way we think about work. By the end of March, most non-essential employers had shifted to remote work. Emblematic of this shift is the stock price of Zoom, which soared almost 500 per cent between March and November 2020. While IT departments were busy acquiring new software, little attention was being paid to how workers could best employ the technology.

The biggest challenge for the coalition during the pandemic was keeping its existing momentum; most members had turned their attention inward to pivoting, re-prioritizing, strategizing, and preparing their business models to survive a lengthy pandemic. The future of work is now front of mind with most of the coalition's members, but many no longer have the time or resources to participate at the same level they had previously. Ironic, isn't it?

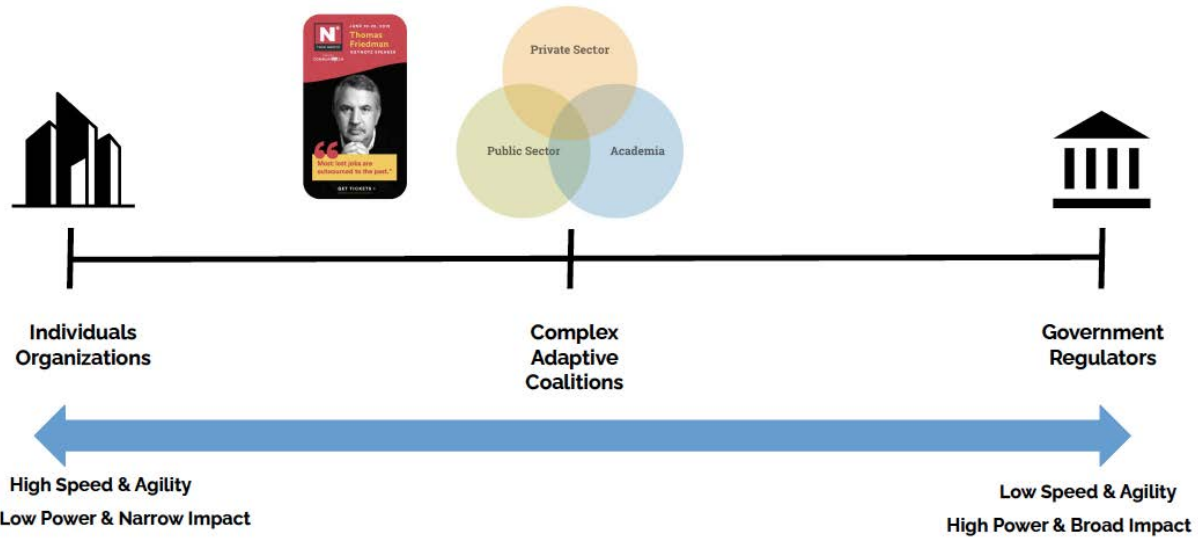
This could have also been a time when the coalition fell apart. New and urgent priorities resulting from the pandemic could have caused all the partners to abandon their roles and commitments to the coalition, but the constant drumbeat of activity kept it together. The backbone team acted as both co-ordinator and cheerleader, keeping the momentum going.

We will remain in an environment of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity (VUCA) for the foreseeable future. In a VUCA environment, organizations need to look outwards and collaborate within a community to survive, thrive and succeed when it comes to talent. [The decentralization of the workplace](#) is a double-edged sword; employers and competitors now have access to global talent at their fingertips. For employers with little access to local talent, the shift to remote work is a welcome change, whereas employers who rely on a local workforce and are unwilling to look outside their regions will face even greater competition for the people they need. Regardless of your industry, it's imperative to understand changing workplace trends and build a responsive plan that accounts for the future of work and learning.

How will you adapt?

Annex A

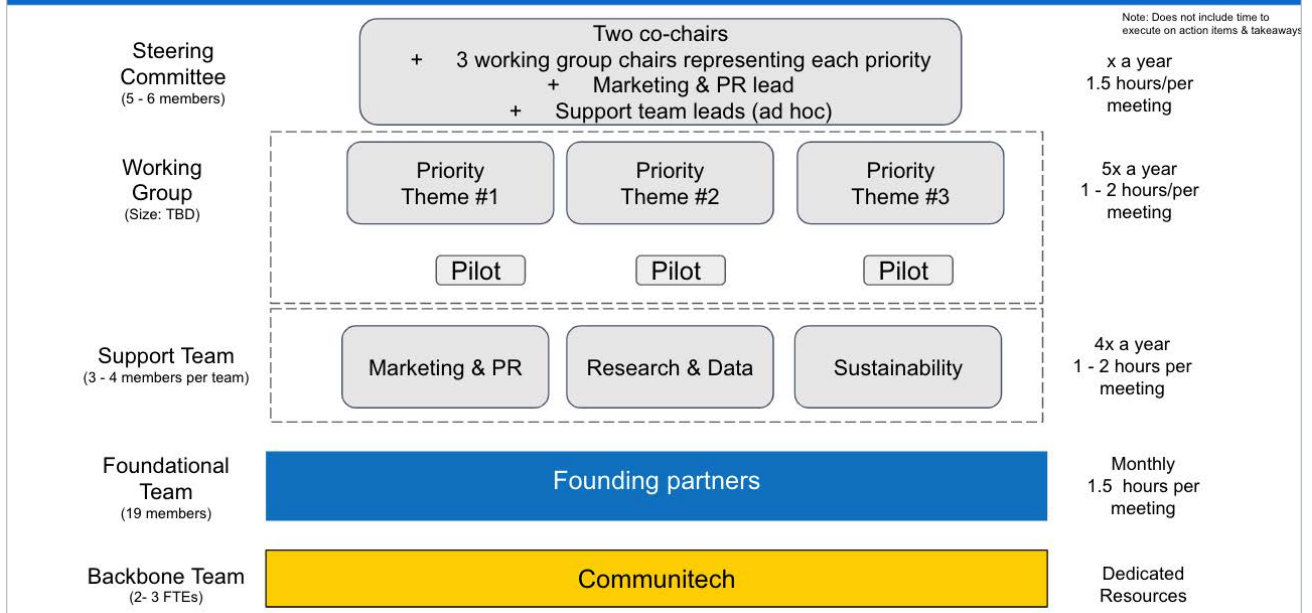
COMMUNITY BASED ADAPTIVE COALITIONS ARE IN THE BEST POSITION TO MOVE WITH SPEED & AGILITY TO CREATE IMPACT IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING ENVIRONMENT



Source: Thomas Friedman


Annex B

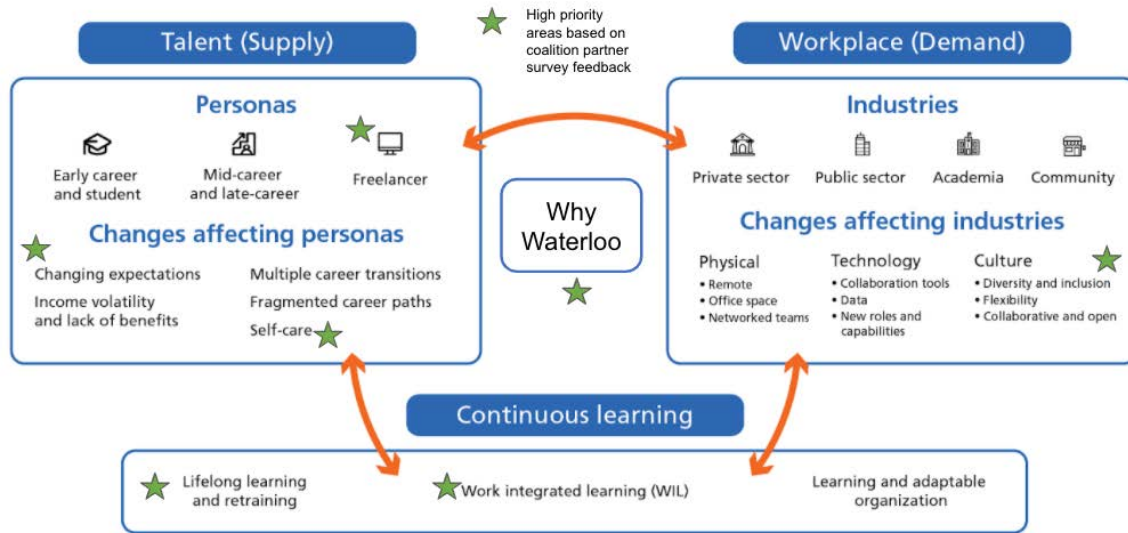
Governance structure



Annex C

Data collection results: Coalition partners identified some high priority themes

To be discussed at meeting 



Annex D

MANDATE LETTER

Future of Work and Learning Coalition | Research Working Group

WORKING GROUP TITLE	Research Working Group
WORKING GROUP LEAD(S)	
WORKING GROUP MEMBERS	

VISION STATEMENT

KEY MILESTONES/OUTPUTS IN YEAR 1

Audience

Outputs / Milestones:

What key relationships do you need to maintain to achieve your milestones? How will you engage those audiences?

How will you measure progress?

What are the key dependencies and risks to manage? What resources will you require?

Glossary