CANADIAN EDITION

WHAT THE FUTURE: SUCCESS

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+ The new bargain between employers and employees, ambition beyond traditional milestones, and why the ultimate status symbols of 2035 might be invisible.

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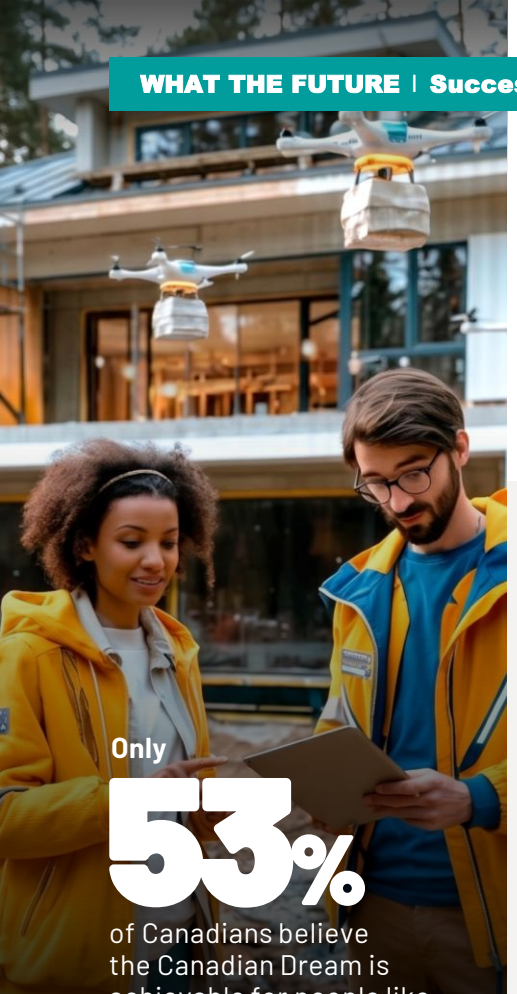


Only

53%

of Canadians believe the Canadian Dream is achievable for people like them.

Source:
What The Future Success survey conducted October 27 - 29, 2026 by Ipsos (n= 1,000 Canadian adults)

The new success equation: Are Canadians changing their dreams — or lowering their expectations?

Canadians haven't necessarily stopped wanting the good life. But as the old rules of getting ahead become less reliable, they're rethinking what success looks like – and what they're willing to sacrifice to achieve it.

The Canadian Dream used to come with a simple set of instructions. Get an education. Find a good job. Buy a home. Work hard, play by the rules, and eventually enjoy the rewards. Nobody promised it would be easy. But there was at least a reasonable expectation that following the instructions would get you somewhere.

These days, with housing affordability testing the limits of household budgets, careers becoming less predictable and retirement feeling increasingly expensive, Canadians might be forgiven for wondering whether somebody changed the rules without telling them.

Ipsos' new *What The Future: Success* research finds that nearly seven in ten Canadians still believe Canada is a place where people can build a better life for themselves and their families.

Yet just 53% believe the Canadian Dream is achievable for people like them. And here's a rather uncomfortable finding: 69% believe you can do everything right and still not get ahead financially. So much for the idea that hard work is all it takes.

It's tempting to conclude that Canadians are abandoning traditional definitions of success. After all, 87% say success is more about having the life they want than impressing others. And nearly three-quarters would rather have freedom and control over their time than a high-status job.

But perhaps we're asking the wrong question.

Are Canadians redefining success because their aspirations have changed? Or are they adjusting their expectations because the things they've always wanted have become harder to achieve?

The good life, on different terms

Ask Canadians what makes them feel successful, and the answers aren't especially extravagant. A safe, comfortable home tops the list, followed by enough money to live the way they want, close relationships and a comfortable retirement. It's not exactly a wish list of yachts and private jets.

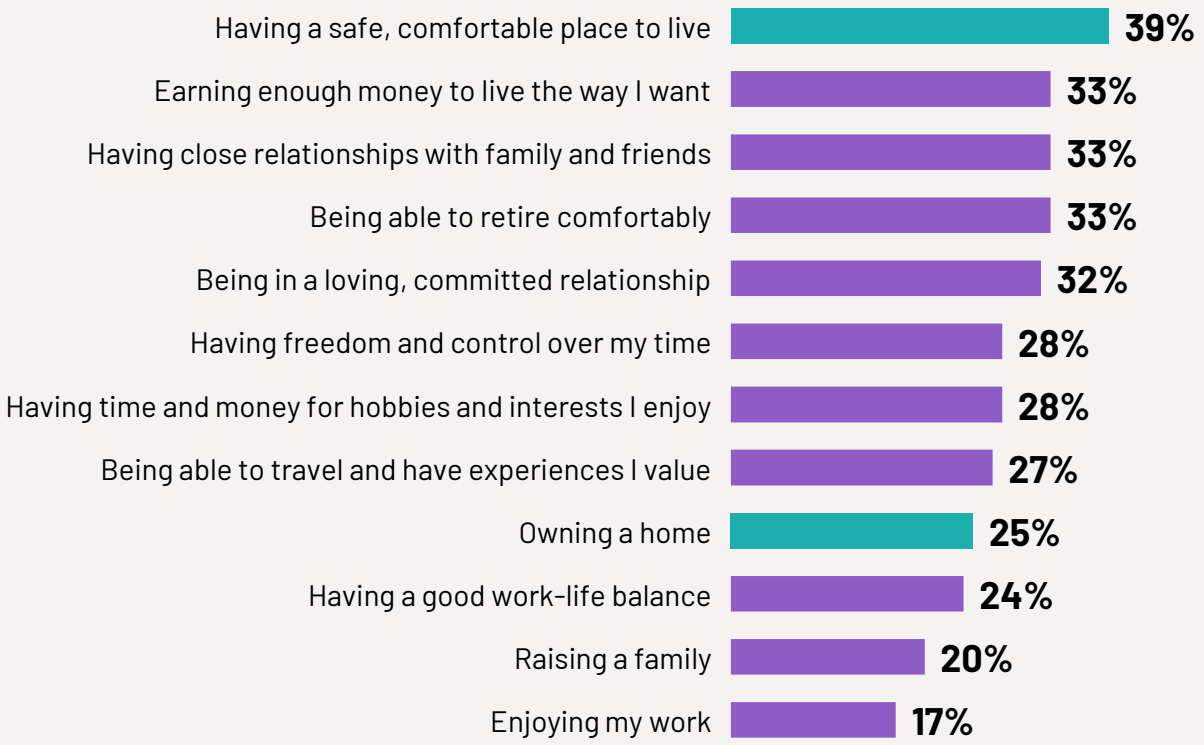
But look a little closer. While having a safe, comfortable place to live tops the list, owning that home ranks considerably lower. Canadians are more likely to identify close relationships, control over their time, and the freedom to pursue hobbies and travel as measures of success. In a country where homeownership has long been a defining milestone of adulthood, that's a distinction worth paying attention to. **Perhaps success is becoming less about what we own and more about how we live.**

For many Canadians, success isn't necessarily about accumulating more. It's about having enough — enough security, enough freedom, enough time to enjoy the life they're building. But there's a difference between deciding that money and status aren't everything and concluding that certain financial milestones are simply out of reach.

Nearly one in three Canadians want financial peace of mind but don't expect to achieve it. A similar proportion aspire to a comfortable retirement but doubt they'll get there. Perhaps they haven't decided that traditional success no longer matters. They've simply had to reconsider what's realistic. What looks like a cultural redefinition of success may also be a practical renegotiation of expectations.

What makes a successful life? Security comes first.

Q: What makes Canadians feel successful? Respondents could select up to five.



Source: What The Future Success survey conducted October 27 – 29, 2026 by Ipsos (n= 1,000 Canadian adults)

Young, ambitious and not giving up

If anyone is supposed to be rewriting the rules of success, it's younger Canadians. We're told they're rejecting the corporate ladder, prioritizing experiences over possessions and refusing to organize their lives around their parents' milestones. But the picture is more complicated.

Among Canadians aged 18–34, the leading measure of success is earning enough money to live the way they want (43%). Loving relationships, work-life balance, a comfortable home and control over their time follow closely behind. That's hardly a rejection of financial ambition. It's a desire to make sure ambition serves a life worth living.

Despite housing affordability challenges and economic uncertainty, nearly two-thirds (64%) are optimistic about building the life they want. Yet 58% already feel behind where they expected to be, and the same proportion say financial pressures have changed what success means to them.

Maybe they're not abandoning the Canadian Dream. Maybe they're trying to make it work on their own terms. But the more surprising story may lie elsewhere.

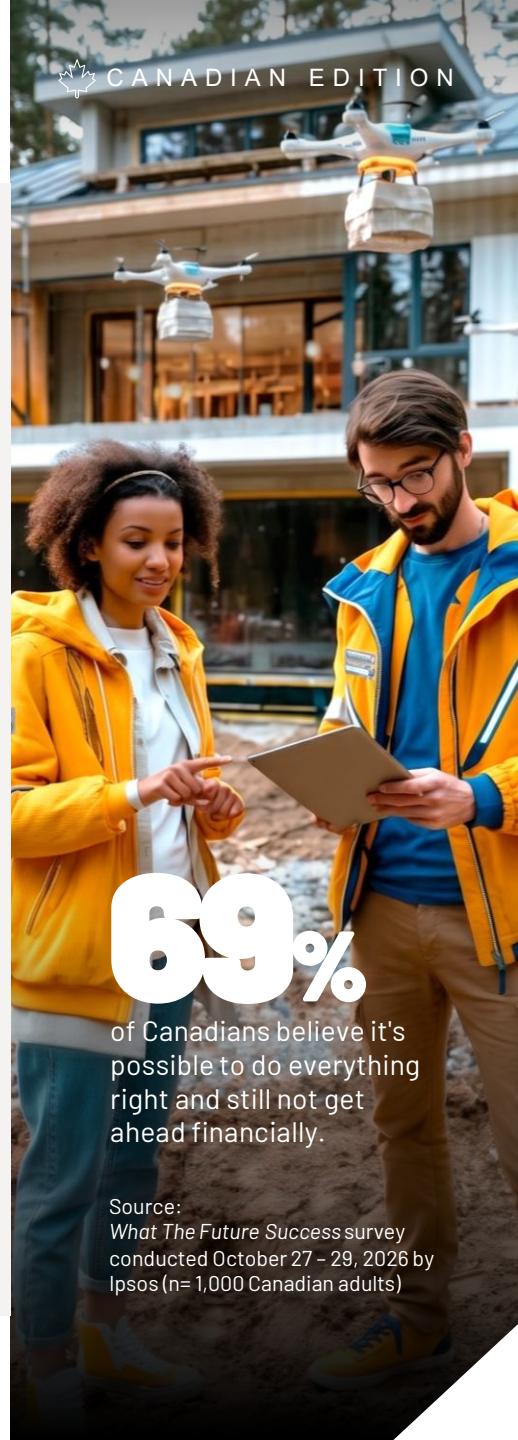
The midlife squeeze

Canadians aged 35–54 are supposed to be hitting their stride. Careers established. Financial foundations taking shape. Retirement beginning to look plausible. Yet in our snapshot of Canada today, they're the least convinced that the Canadian Dream is within reach.

Just 46% believe the Canadian Dream is achievable for people like them, compared with 54% of younger Canadians and 59% of those aged 55–75. More than half (57%) feel behind where they expected to be. And 36% want financial peace of mind but don't expect to achieve it. The same proportion aspire to a comfortable retirement but doubt they'll get there.

> **It's one thing to discover the ladder is harder to climb. It's another to realize, halfway up, that it might not reach where you thought it did.**

For those in midlife, the stakes are different. Careers, families, mortgages and financial obligations aren't hypothetical future considerations. They're already part of the equation. And changing course comes with complications. Perhaps the most unsettling crisis of expectations isn't happening at the beginning of adult life, but somewhere in the middle.



When the destination changes, so does the journey

If the old rules no longer guarantee the old rewards, perhaps it's time to question the rules themselves. Is a university degree still the golden ticket? Or might a skilled trade offer greater security? Is climbing the corporate ladder worth the climb? And is the point of working hard to accumulate more things, or to have the freedom to enjoy life?

These aren't simply questions about education or employment. They're questions about what makes a life successful — and how much we're willing to sacrifice to achieve it.

The trade-offs get trickier when the future feels uncertain. How much should we save for retirement when there are places to see and experiences to have today? How long should we keep putting off the good stuff in the hope that someday we'll have earned it?

Meanwhile, artificial intelligence is changing the equation again. The skills that once offered a dependable path to success may not carry the same weight tomorrow.

Canadians want security, but they also want freedom. They want to build for the future without postponing living indefinitely. Perhaps the future of success won't be about rejecting traditional milestones but finding new ways to balance competing aspirations — and having the freedom to make those choices.

The future of getting ahead

Three-quarters of Canadians believe the path to success will become less predictable for the next generation. The Canadian Dream may not be disappearing, but the assumption that there's a single, reliable route to achieving it is increasingly open to question.

Perhaps Canadians aren't dreaming smaller. Perhaps they're simply questioning whether the old rules can still deliver the lives they want.

> **The question isn't simply what success will look like in the future. It's who will have the freedom to define it — and the opportunity to achieve it.**



Diane Ridgway-Cross *leads Ipsos Strategy3's Canadian practice and is the managing editor for the What The Future Canada thought leadership series.*

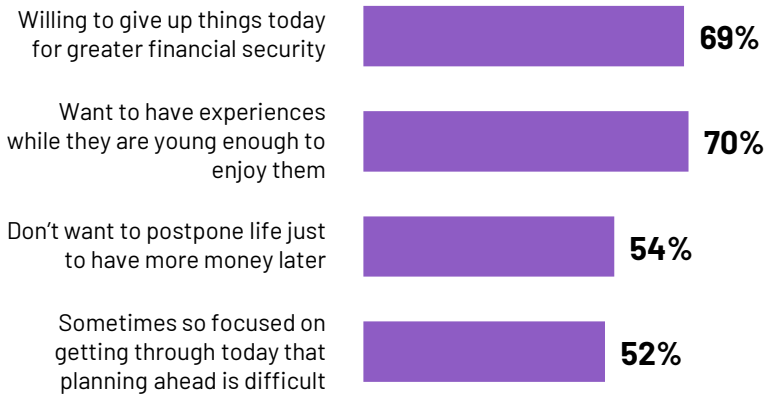


The new rules of getting ahead

Three tensions reshaping the future of success in Canada

01 The future can't wait forever

Canadians are balancing the pursuit of long-term financial security with a desire to enjoy life today.

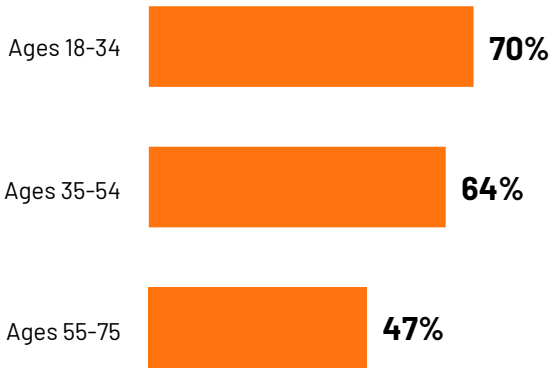


What if success is no longer about what we're willing to sacrifice today, but what we're unwilling to postpone until tomorrow?

02 The starting line isn't equal

Younger Canadians believe that getting ahead depends on family resources as much as individual effort.

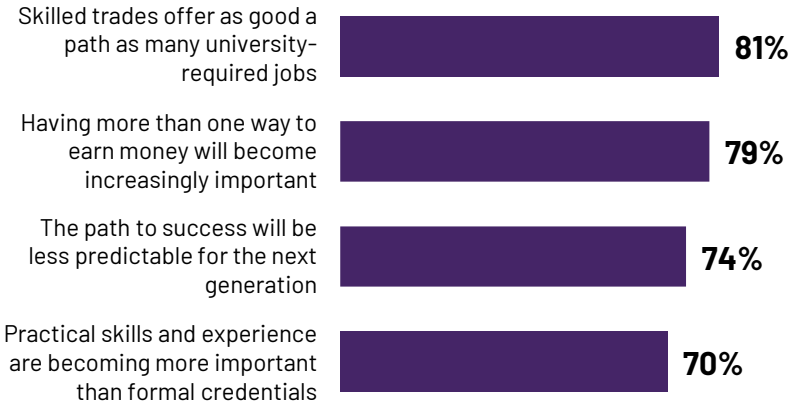
% agreeing that getting ahead in Canada can depend as much on financial support from family as on hard work



If success depends as much on where you start as how hard you work, what happens to the promise that anyone can get ahead?

03 The old playbook is losing its power

Canadians are questioning traditional credentials and anticipating less predictable paths to success.



What if the path to success is no longer a ladder to climb, but one we have to build for ourselves?

Source: *What The Future Success* survey conducted October 27 – 29, 2026 by Ipsos (n= 1,000 Canadian adults)



80%

of Canadians under 35 believe young adults no longer have a realistic opportunity to build a better life than the generation before them.

Source: Ipsos Canada
Context Study, Q3 2026

My parents believed in the Canadian dream. Will my children?

By **Mike Colledge**, Executive Insights Lead, Ipsos Canada

In Canada's earliest days, the Canadian Dream was a simple dream: access to land, often free, and a chance to build a life. For my parents' generation, the dream was more complex. It included saving, sacrifice to make home ownership possible, and a bit of delayed gratification in return for economic advancement and the promise that their children would enjoy even greater success than they did.

When my mom was in high school, she lived alone in a YMCA. Every day she carried everything she owned to school and stored it in a locker so it wouldn't be stolen. After classes she carried it all back. She had little contact with either of her parents. It was during that period that she met my dad.

My dad was one of five children, and his father was a firefighter who later became a fire chief. During the Second World War, he spent several years overseas, looking out the back of a Lancaster bomber while my grandmother struggled to make ends meet at home. Their family wasn't poor by the standards of the day, but five children, a war, and the lingering effects of the Depression made for many lean years.

> **If life was a ladder, my mom started out on the ground. My dad may have started on the first or second rung. But the ladder was intact and, most importantly, they could see the top.**

My parents did what was expected of them and largely received what was promised. They worked hard, saved, delayed gratification, and invested in their future. My dad started on a loading dock in a manufacturing plant and eventually worked his way into management. My mom did bookkeeping and more while raising two children.

They bought a house that, when they moved in, had no front door and no toilet. The door went in first. The toilet went in next. Over time they improved the house, its value increased, and it became a foundation for future prosperity.

My dad's side hustle was farming. He worked full-time in manufacturing while spending evenings and weekends farming rented land and my grandparents' farm.

For years I assumed he did it because he loved farming. Later, he told me farming was part passion, but primarily another way to get ahead.

They took risks. They carried multiple mortgages to buy my grandparents' farm. They built equity, accumulated assets, and steadily climbed the ladder. Every move from one home to another helped grow their wealth. Alongside government benefits and a corporate pension, those investments eventually provided a comfortable retirement and allowed my parents to help their children get a good start in life.

As remarkable as I find their story, it isn't remarkable at all. It has been lived in countless variations by Canadian families from the late 1930s through the early 1980s.

The dream was never really about houses, farms, pensions, or investment portfolios. Those were simply the tools.

The dream itself was the belief that effort and patience would lead to comfort and control later in life, and that their children would live better than they did.

Today, that dream is being doubted.

The ladder was intact for my parents, but my children look up and see a longer ladder that is missing a few rungs. Their assessment is not entirely irrational.

In the 1960s, the average home cost roughly $136,000 in today's dollars and mortgage payments consumed about 16% of average family income. By the 2010s, the average price had risen to roughly $428,000 and mortgage payments consumed 23% of income. A young worker in the late 1970s could typically save a down payment in about five years. By 2021, it could take more than three times as long.

My parents' generation accepted sacrifice because they believed it would eventually be rewarded. Today, many young Canadians worry that the hardship may be permanent. They still want independence and a better life but are increasingly uncertain whether the traditional path to success will get them there.

Yet despite these pressures, younger Canadians haven't abandoned the idea of planning for the future. In a recent Ipsos survey, just 21% of Gen Z respondents said they prioritize immediate satisfaction, even at the expense of longer-term outcomes. By contrast, 51% said they try to balance enjoying life today with planning for the future, while another 29% prioritize long-term goals, even if it means sacrificing some immediate pleasure.

My parents could see where the ladder led, even when the climb was difficult. For my children's generation, the destination is less certain, and some of the rungs that helped previous generations get ahead are increasingly out of reach.

The challenge facing Canada is not a generation that has abandoned ambition. It is a generation that is less certain ambition will be enough.

Rebuilding the Canadian Dream means more than restoring the opportunity to get ahead. It means restoring the belief that the effort will be worth it.

A range of possibilities: Rethinking what a successful career looks like



Noel Baldwin

Executive Director of
the Future Skills Centre (FSC)

For generations, the Canadian success story followed a familiar script: study hard, earn a degree, build a career. But what if, today, the biggest obstacle to career success isn't a lack of ambition or ability, but an outdated idea of what a successful career looks like?

Noel Baldwin leads the Future Skills Centre, a federally funded, pan-Canadian initiative that has invested more than $300 million in hundreds of research and innovation projects since 2019, exploring how Canadians can prepare for a rapidly changing world of work.

In this conversation, he challenges some of our most persistent assumptions about education and work — and what it really means to build a successful career.

What The Future interview with Noel Baldwin

Rama Pamela Zuñiga: The Future Skills Centre is focused on preparing Canadians for the future of work. What are the biggest questions you're trying to answer?

Noel Baldwin: The Centre is built around two questions: how is the demand for skills changing as the economy changes, and how do people get and keep skills throughout their working lives?

We're pan-Canadian and funded by the Government of Canada. We test new ideas through research and pilot projects in communities across the country, then bring that evidence to policymakers, practitioners and researchers. When something works, we help scale it, and we find partners who can take the most successful initiatives across the country.

Zuñiga: You talk about how the required skills are changing. But for generations, we've been told that education and hard work are the surest path to success. Does that promise still hold?

Baldwin: The promise isn't broken. Our education systems are still the engines that build the skills our economy needs. What's changing is our understanding of what those skills are.

Employers tell us that technical skills are essential, but they're the entry ticket. What sets people apart is the ability to adapt, think critically, solve problems and work well in diverse teams. The foundation for all of that is basic skills: literacy, numeracy, and the ability to process information and apply it in new contexts.

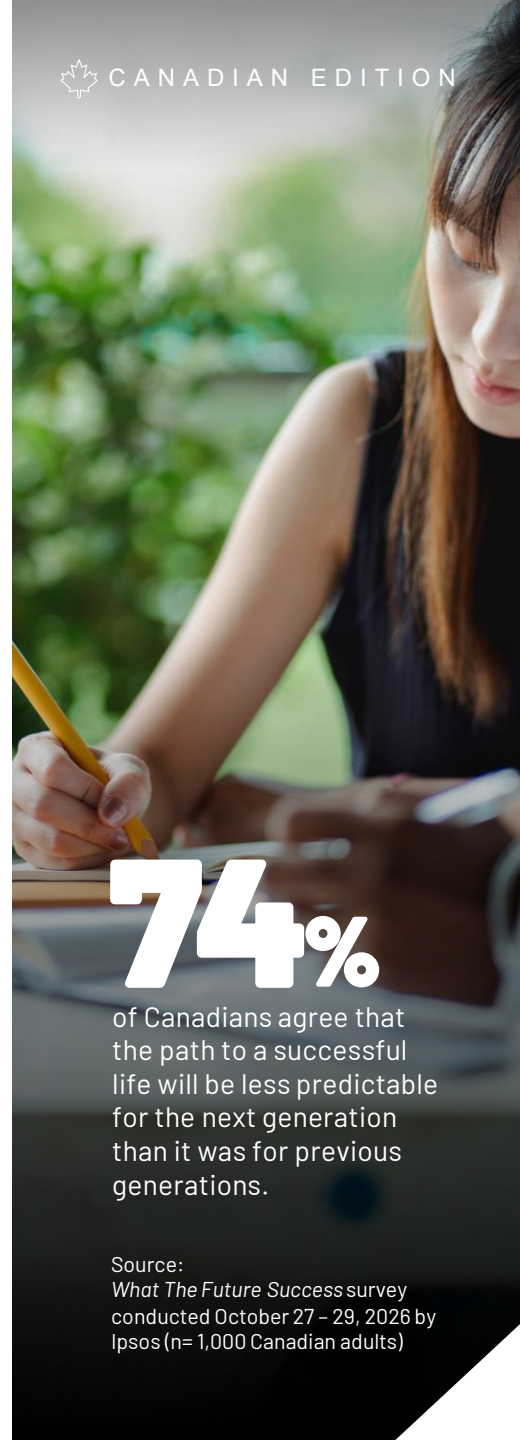
Zuñiga: You've emphasized the importance of foundational skills. But if AI can increasingly do the thinking for us, won't those skills become less important?

Baldwin: It's the opposite. AI raises the bar on foundational skills. To use these tools well, you need to know how to ask the right questions and how to judge what comes back. Without that foundation, you can't tell whether the tool is actually making you more productive.

Where AI will be disruptive is in how people enter some professions. In law, for example, early-career roles were built on the kind of repetitive research work AI does well. We'll need to rethink how people build expertise. In the near term, the bigger change will be in how work gets done, not in the number of jobs.

Zuñiga: If AI is changing how people enter professions and the work they'll do once they're there, what would you tell an 18-year-old trying to choose a path today?

Baldwin: I'd start by telling them there's no single right path. We often tell ourselves that Canada sends everyone to university, and it isn't true. We rank near the top of the OECD for post-secondary attainment, but that has never been driven by university alone.



Follow what interests you, then understand what you're walking into: how long the training takes, what it costs and what the career looks like on the other side. And remember that Canada gives you something many countries don't: room to change your mind. In Germany or Switzerland, once you're placed on a pathway, it's much harder to step off. Here, you can change course without paying a steep price in time or money. That flexibility is worth protecting.

Zuñiga: You make changing course sound like an advantage, yet we often see it as a setback. Are we measuring career success with an outdated yardstick?

Baldwin: I think so. One of my nephews did three years of a business program and realized it wasn't for him. He took an HVAC course and is now employed, well paid and much more satisfied. That's success. What we really want is for people to find meaningful employment that leads to a meaningful life.

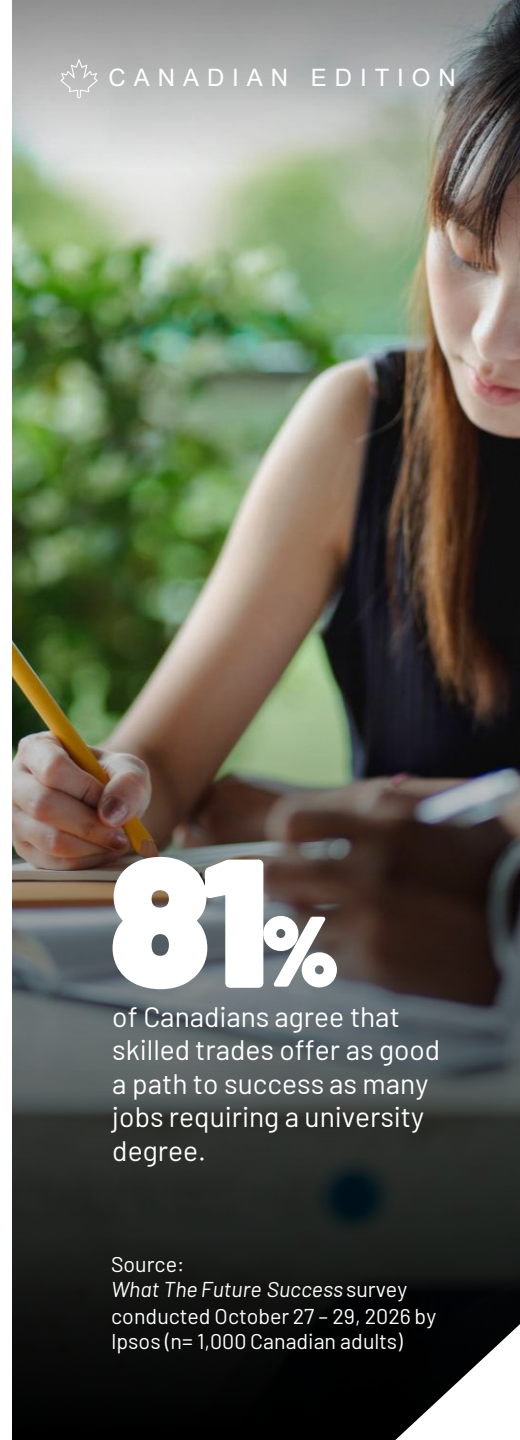
The problem isn't their lack of imagination; it's their lack of exposure. Career guidance in Canada is still too patchwork and too thin, so young people often don't see the full range of possibilities.

We need to challenge our own assumptions, too. Studying liberal arts or fine arts doesn't mean you can't become an entrepreneur who employs a whole lot of people.

Zuñiga: Your nephew's experience challenges some of those assumptions. Have we underestimated what a successful career in the skilled trades can look like?

Baldwin: For many people, a career in the trades goes from the job site to owning a contracting company and employing others. There's a real entrepreneurial side to it. With a wave of retirements coming, there will be opportunities to buy businesses, and experienced tradespeople can play a vital role mentoring the next generation. Partners like SkillPlan in British Columbia have built tools that show young people what the work is really like, down to being an electrician on a Winnipeg job site in January.

For 20 years, we've mostly made the economic case, and it's a strong one. But this moment of building a more sovereign, resilient Canada opens up a values-based conversation. Sovereignty for the country can also be built by sovereignty for you. Having skills that let you build a sustainable career, and build what your community needs, is a powerful message.



Zuñiga: We've talked about the freedom to change careers. But with work evolving so quickly, how realistic is it to expect Canadians to keep learning and reskilling throughout their lives?

Baldwin: We have work to do. Only about half of working-age Canadians do upskilling or reskilling in any given year, and an even smaller share say their employer contributes financially. When we ask why not, it's often not cost. It's time, with busy commitments at work and at home.

That's why the practical details matter. Can you get to the training site? What happens if the babysitter calls in sick? Our work has shown that these kinds of supports can be as powerful as the training itself. And employers, who have the clearest view of what's needed, should have more skin in the game.

Zuñiga: You've described how difficult it can be for people to keep developing their skills. What responsibility do employers have in making career success possible?

Baldwin: Many small and medium-sized businesses don't have the luxury of being selective: they need workers. It also isn't enough just to get people in the door; you need workplaces where people want to stay. Some sectors have historically not been welcoming to people of different genders and backgrounds.

I'd also encourage an asset-based mindset. Start with the skills your people already have and ask how they can be adapted. And put the talent question at the start of any strategy, not the end, or you'll end up in a crunch.

Zuñiga: We've talked about changing career paths, new skills and the need to keep learning. If you could change one thing about how Canada prepares people for success over the next decade, what would it be?

Baldwin: We treat formal education and the learning people do once they're working as separate chunks, rather than one continuous path. We need a more coherent vision of how people move through it all.

If, 10 years from now, more Canadians knew where to go, what to do and who would help them when they see disruption coming, we'd be in a really strong position. That would be an excellent outcome.



Rama Pamela Zuñiga *is a Senior Engagement Lead at Ipsos Strategy3 in Canada.*

We treat formal education and the learning people do once they're working as separate chunks, rather than one continuous path."

Choosing the Canadian Dream: What newcomers can teach us about the meaning of success



Daniel Bernhard

CEO
Institute for Canadian Citizenship

Few decisions reflect a greater belief in the possibility of a better future than leaving one's home country to begin again somewhere new. For generations, Canada has attracted people willing to make extraordinary sacrifices in pursuit of opportunity, security and a better life for their families.

But what does success look like through the eyes of someone who has chosen Canada? And what happens when the promise of a new beginning meets the realities of building a life here?

Ipsos Canada's Executive Insights Lead Mike Colledge spoke with Daniel Bernhard, CEO of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, about the hopes and ambitions newcomers bring to Canada, the challenges and unexpected rewards they encounter, and what their experiences can teach us about our own definitions of success.

What The Future interview with Daniel Bernhard

Mike Colledge: Let's start at the beginning. People don't uproot their lives without believing something better awaits them. When newcomers choose Canada, what does success look like in their minds? What are they hoping to achieve or experience that they couldn't in their home countries?

Daniel Bernhard: I think it's tough for us as Canadians to fully appreciate that there are countries where even the wealthy don't have reliable access to drinking water or electricity, where people can end up in jail for holding certain political opinions, or where it's unsafe to walk outside at night.

Someone who came from South Africa told me he had to lock his family behind gates every night to protect them from crime. When he arrived in Canada one of the first things he did was to go on long walks at night because he'd never been able to do that.

People come to Canada expecting to be able to grow their business without having to bribe people, to participate in the political process without worrying about their safety, and to have a realistic chance of owning a house in a safe suburban area.

Colledge: Are there differences in how people from different countries define success?

Bernhard: I think more depends on the category of entry than the country of origin. People from a refugee camp or who come as the parents of principal applicants are often very different than the principal applicants themselves.

The applicants, the 60% who are granted permanent residency, tend to be about 30 years old, have a very good university education, and some professional experience. In our own office we have about 30 people from 20 different countries. Some of them arrived 25 years ago, but some of them arrived very recently. They have different cultures and skin colors. But their expectations of a life in Canada, their expectations for success, are remarkably similar to other Canadians. They want to have a prosperous life, a place that is safe, a place that provides them and their family with opportunity and the ability to contribute.

Colledge: What does it feel like when newcomers realize the life they imagined in Canada may be harder to achieve than they expected?

Bernhard: I think there is a sobering reality upon arrival about just how expensive life is here and how long it's going to take to achieve success. Some people adjust and retain their optimism



more than others. Some do leave and unfortunately that group is growing. Most decide to stick it out and for those that do the outcomes are pretty good. Five or six years after arrival, the principal applicant of an economic immigrant family earns more income than their Canadian-born counterparts. Immigrating is a struggle. It is hard on families and particularly hard on kids. But when it does work out, there is a great sense of accomplishment and achievement.

Colledge: When you talk to newcomers who feel they've succeeded in Canada, what do they point to?

Bernhard: Financial success and home ownership stand out. One thing that our research tends to show is that newcomers' views converge with the views of the general population the longer they're here.

On just about every question — whether about politics, faith in Canada, trust in institutions —immigrants may start out with different views, but the longer they are here, the more their views align with the people born in Canada. Same priorities. Same consumer culture. Same professional values. Same definition of success.

Colledge: You've witnessed what becoming Canadian means to many people. What does that moment represent?

Bernhard: Citizenship is often talked about as a legal status, but it's actually a state of mind. A feeling that this is my place; these are my people.

One person wrote to me after attending a CFL game where there was a citizenship ceremony at halftime. He was not yet a citizen, but he said when he stood with the crowd and sang "O Canada" he realized for the first time that he belonged here. The citizenship ceremony is a time when people look back. There were hard times; deciding to leave, coming over, arriving, reuniting with family, finding work, settling in with the kids and the ceremony is a time to recognize that they've done something that was both hard and meaningful.

Colledge: So, the feeling of citizenship arrives earlier?

Bernhard: My parents came to Canada from Chile, and I remember my dad telling me that one day he woke up and he had had a dream in English. That was his epiphany moment. It's like that for a lot of people. They have a moment when they realize that they're not just here to visit. They're not just here to rent. They're here to own. That's really what citizenship is. It's an ownership stake in the country and its future.

> **"They're not just here to visit. They're not just here to rent. They're here to own."**

Colledge: Is there anything about how newcomers look at a successful life that Canadians would benefit from?

Bernhard: I think Canadians would benefit from hearing newcomers' optimism for Canada. There are so many Canadians who are down on the country. That's not all unreasonable.

There is a lot we can improve, and our prosperity should never be taken for granted. But most immigrants come from places that are in worse shape and their optimism, despite the adversity that they face, is a really powerful lesson.

Colledge: Do you think Canadians understand what successful immigration looks like?

Bernhard: Not really. The story of a newcomer who came with one dollar in their pocket and sacrificed their entire life for their children isn't today's story. In that story, the immigrant is the recipient of some benefit from Canada, and we expect them to repay our generosity. Today, Canada needs these people. They arrive with skills, experience, education and language abilities that benefit Canada. We are seeing doctors and engineers, people coming to help design the high-speed rail line or build modular housing. When you see these people, success starts to look different, as does our relationship with immigrants.

Colledge: Has the experience of meeting so many newcomers changed your own definition of success?

Bernhard: Absolutely. Not in a "success is more than material things" way. I've learned that success is not something that's owed to you. What immigrants do is really hard, and they succeed at surprising rates. Their willingness to go through not just adversity, but in many cases injustice, discrimination, not being assessed on their merits, being judged for accents, having their home country experience discounted and still succeed is a lesson for everyone.

I now understand that failure is everything that comes before success and success is a journey of adversity. It's not about innate talent, it's about one's willingness to adapt, to take on adversity and to live through the uncomfortable times. The people who understand that success is going to be hard improve their chance of realizing that success.



***Mike Colledge** is*
Executive Insights Lead at Ipsos Canada

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Listening to Gen Z voices: What will it take to feel successful?

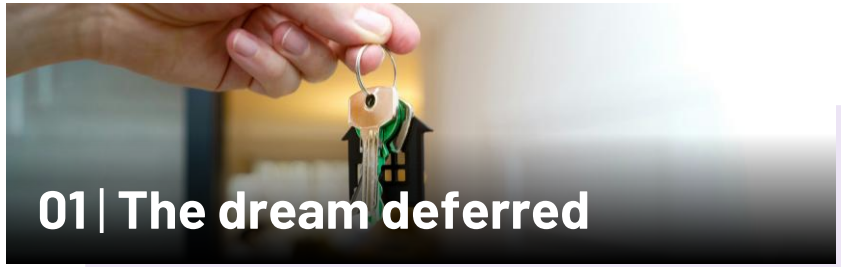
Six young Canadians reflect on the ambitions they inherited, the realities they're navigating and what it means to build a successful life on their own terms.

What does success look like when you're just starting out? For some young Canadians, the familiar milestones still matter: a home, a family, a fulfilling career and financial security. But the path to achieving them looks increasingly uncertain. Others are questioning the milestones themselves, placing greater value on independence, well-being or simply the security to build a life on their own terms.

We invited Gen Z members of Ipsos' Conversation Community to reflect on their hopes, challenges and evolving definitions of success.

Their stories reveal something more complicated than a generation rejecting traditional ambition: some are holding on to familiar dreams, others are rewriting them, and some are simply trying to build a life secure enough to imagine what comes next.

These stories are drawn from responses to six open-ended questions posed to members of Ipsos' Conversation Community in November 2026. Names have been changed to protect participants' privacy. These individual perspectives are illustrative and are not representative of all young Canadians.



01 | The dream deferred

Emma, 27 | On homeownership, hard work and changing timelines

Emma has a familiar vision of success: owning a home in the Greater Toronto Area, having a job that pays the bills and building a happy, healthy family. Her parents were married and owned their first home by 24. She once imagined graduating from university and buying a condo on her own before eventually settling down with a partner. Four years after graduation, she's had to reconsider.

"Solo homeownership isn't a realistic goal, so I've instead had to wait to buy with a partner."

Yet Emma hasn't lost faith in the advice she grew up with. "I was always told that if you work hard the rest will come. I still think that's 100% true."

Today, she budgets carefully, setting aside money for savings while making room for travel and experiences. The destination hasn't changed, even if the journey is taking longer than expected.



02 | The price of starting over

Sarah, 29 | On education, family and the pressure of falling behind

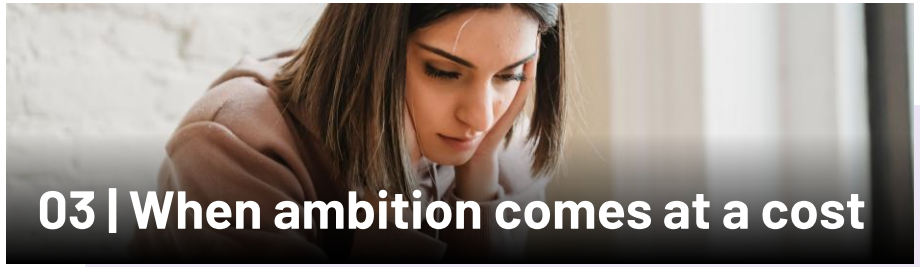
Sarah hopes to return to school for nursing, build a rewarding career and raise her young son in a home with room for animals and a growing family. But pursuing those ambitions comes with financial uncertainty. She already has student loans from her previous postsecondary education, an investment that hasn't delivered the advantages she expected.

"I have student loans from doing post secondary and still make the same amount if not less than someone who didn't."

Still, she's considering investing in education again, hoping a nursing career will create better opportunities for her family. Homeownership is another dream that feels increasingly distant. Between everyday expenses, unexpected bills and saving for the future, progress can be difficult.

"I thought by now, nearing 30, I would have achieved more by now. I just need to manage my expectations so that I don't feel like I'm already failing."

For Sarah, the challenge isn't just achieving the life she wants. It's learning not to measure herself against the timetable she once believed she should follow.



03 | When ambition comes at a cost

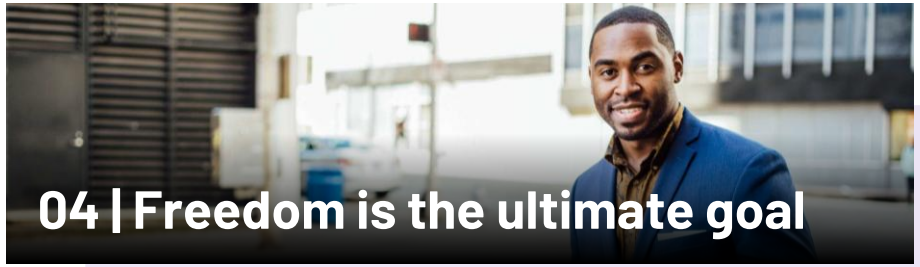
Alex, 24 | On burnout, happiness and learning to slow down

Alex isn't dreaming of an impressive job title or an extravagant lifestyle. She wants meaningful time with loved ones, space for hobbies, and a job that doesn't leave her physically or mentally exhausted. Growing up, she was encouraged to work hard, earn good grades, attend university and secure a well-paying job. But pursuing those goals changed her perspective. "Throughout university, I was depressed, tired, and just trying to stay afloat."

Now, she's questioning the assumption that perseverance is always worth the sacrifice. Her priorities have shifted toward protecting her health, enjoying relationships and making memories. When faced with the choice between saving money and attending a concert, she often chooses the experience, valuing the joy it brings.

"Success to me is less about rushing through life, making sacrifices, and earning money, and more about slowing down and finding joy."

The question is no longer simply what can be achieved, but whether the sacrifices required to get there are worth making.



04 | Freedom is the ultimate goal

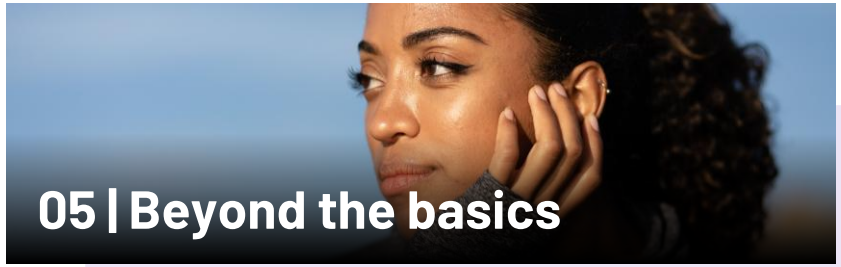
Daniel, 26 | On financial independence and the power of choice

For Daniel, success comes down to one thing: having options. Asked what success would look like at 35, he says: **"Financial flexibility, having options to choose where and how much time I want to work."**

His parents saw success in a steady income, a structured nine-to-five job and the security of working until retirement. Daniel sees those things as a means to a different end. **"For me it's having the financial freedom to live with autonomy."**

Daniel hasn't abandoned the traditional formula of education, hard work and delayed gratification. He credits good grades and reputable schools with helping him get where he is today, but he's changed what he expects those efforts to deliver. His focus is on accumulating assets and creating greater independence, although he also hopes to find a partner and build a family.

For Daniel, success isn't about reaching a particular income or status. It's about having the freedom to decide what comes next.



05 | Beyond the basics

Maya, 28 | On inherited expectations and expanding the meaning of success

Maya imagines a future filled with family, friends, a fulfilling career and the freedom to travel without financial stress. Her ambitions have been shaped by her parents' experience immigrating to Canada.

"I think when my parents immigrated to Canada, they weren't afforded the ability to think beyond basic necessities or the concept of being truly successful."

They encouraged her to study hard, pursue a stable career and avoid unnecessary risks. She still values that foundation, but believes success requires more than professional and financial achievement.

"What was always missing in their advice was aspects about health, both physical and mental as well as the importance of community and having friends."

She dreams of owning a beautiful home and a cottage where friends and family can gather, although she recognizes those ambitions may take time. Maya's definition of success is based on imagining a life beyond financial security, all while building on what her parents have achieved.



06 | When security is the dream

Jordan, 29 | On safety, stability and the freedom to imagine a future

For Jordan, success isn't about career advancement, homeownership or financial independence. It's about something far more immediate.

"Honestly, with all the hardships I've faced already in life, a successful life looks like stable housing with running water and not wondering if I can afford to eat after my animals are fed."

Having experienced housing insecurity and painful personal relationships, Jordan measures success through safety, stability and peace.

"I'll feel like I've made it when I can sleep a full night without worrying about my safety."

The idea of saving for the future feels distant when everyday decisions involve choosing between essential needs. Relationships, too, are viewed through a different lens: finding someone who offers love, respect and safety. And when asked to imagine life ten years from now, Jordan's answer is striking:

"The sad truth? I don't imagine myself 10 years from now. I'm kinda just getting through every day."

Shifts: From building a life to living in beta

NOW:
The roadmap to success is breaking down



Canadians still aspire to financial security, homeownership and a better life. But the familiar formula of working hard, getting ahead and eventually enjoying the rewards is becoming less reliable. At the same time, relationships, experiences and control over time are emerging as important measures of a successful life. **The tension isn't simply that Canadians are redefining success. It's that the traditional path to achieving it is no longer a reliable promise.**

NEXT:
Life becomes a series of reinventions



Instead of building one successful life, people may increasingly pursue several versions of it. Careers become chapters rather than ladders. Homes may become flexible arrangements rather than permanent destinations. Education becomes a recurring investment rather than a one-time credential. As technology, economic pressures and changing priorities reshape people's lives, success may be measured less by how far they've climbed and more by their ability to adapt, change direction and pursue new possibilities. **For some, reinvention will be a choice. For others, a necessity.**

FUTURE:
Success becomes the freedom to choose your next life



In a world of constant disruption, freedom to choose what comes next may become the ultimate measure of success. Wealth matters not simply for what it buys, but for the choices it makes possible. Careers, education, financial products and even communities may be redesigned to support transitions rather than permanence. **A new divide could emerge between those who have the freedom to choose their future and those who must accept the one they're given.**

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From bucket lists to life lists: travel as a new measure of success



Karine Gagnon

General Manager,
Transat Distribution Canada

Karine Gagnon is General Manager of Transat Distribution Canada (TDC), one of Canada's leading travel agency networks with more than 235 Marlin Travel and Club Voyages franchised agencies, as well as affiliated agencies nationwide. Through TDC's wide network of more than 2,100 travel advisors, Gagnon has a front-row seat to how Canadians are shifting their priorities and the role travel plays in living a successful life.

In this conversation, Gagnon reflects on how Canadians are rethinking the itinerary of a successful life: moving bucket-list trips forward, prioritizing experiences over possessions, and increasingly viewing travel not as a reward waiting at the end of the journey, but as an essential part of the journey itself.

What The Future interview with Karine Gagnon

Fernando Aloise: Traditionally, success meant working hard, saving and sacrificing so you could enjoy life later. But Canadians seem increasingly willing to question that formula. What are you seeing in how they approach travel and its place in their lives?

Karine Gagnon: I don't believe Canadians have abandoned traditional markers of success like financial security, homeownership, or career advancement. Those goals still matter.

What's changing is how willing people are to put their lives on hold until every box has been checked.

For a long time, the formula was pretty straightforward: work first, enjoy later. Today, people are looking for ways to enjoy those rewards along the way, rather than waiting for some distant point in the future.

We're seeing that shift play out in travel. The question is becoming less, "Can I afford this eventually?" and more, "If I can reasonably afford to do this now, why am I waiting?"

Aloise: What are you seeing in travel that suggests this shift is real?

Gagnon: We're seeing people move meaningful trips forward. Clients in their forties, fifties, and sixties are choosing to take bucket-list trips earlier instead of waiting until they have reached their retirement savings goals. Families are prioritizing trips while children are still at home, while others are making intentional financial choices to create memorable experiences now.

There's also a growing awareness that circumstances can change. Health challenges, aging parents, children growing up, and unexpected life events are reminders that some opportunities have an expiration date.

One of our advisors shared the story of a long-time client in his early seventies who had recently been diagnosed with early-stage Alzheimer's. He called and said simply, "I don't have much time. I want you to organize this trip for us." What had once been a plan for someday had suddenly become something that couldn't wait.



Aloise: Was there a turning point that changed how Canadians think about prioritizing life experiences?

Gagnon: COVID certainly accelerated that shift. People experienced something they never imagined possible. It was a powerful reminder that even our best-laid plans can be disrupted overnight.

For many, that's changed the conversation from what they can leave behind financially to the memories they can create with the people they love.

One family, for example, pooled their resources to take their mother, who was in her eighties, back to Italy to visit relatives she hadn't seen in years. The trip itself became the milestone. They didn't need a special occasion or another achievement to justify it. What mattered was that they could make it happen while she was still able to go.

Aloise: Younger Canadians seem to be approaching life's traditional milestones differently. How is that changing what travel represents to them?

Gagnon: Absolutely. Many younger Canadians grew up watching their parents work incredibly hard and postpone enjoyment until later in life. They're less inclined to follow that same path. They're also facing a different economic reality. Home ownership feels increasingly out of reach for many, so some are placing greater value on experiences, relationships, and personal growth.

What's striking is their determination to travel. They may do it differently, choosing more affordable accommodations or finding creative ways to stretch their budgets, but they're often willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make those experiences possible.

Aloise: Is travel becoming a new status symbol for Gen Z?

Gagnon: I think we're witnessing a very different definition of status among Gen Z, and there's an interesting paradox. On the surface, they can sometimes appear quite materialistic, conscious of their image, lifestyle and how they present themselves. But I think there's more happening here. It's about expressing an identity, showcasing a lifestyle and sharing what they're accomplishing. It's as if visibility has become a form of social currency.

Travel is interesting in this way because experiences are becoming an important status symbol, but not necessarily in the traditional luxury sense. For Gen Z, it's about discovering places, meeting people, experiencing different cultures and creating memories. It's about living life, not just owning things.

> **“Status is becoming less about what you own and increasingly about the life you can show that you're living.”**

Social media plays a major role in this evolution. Platforms like TikTok are both a source of inspiration and a stage on which these experiences are shared.

Experiences and possessions aren't necessarily competing. They're complementary, but what makes someone feel successful or aspirational is evolving. Status is becoming less about what you own and increasingly about the life you can show that you're living.

Aloise: We've traditionally associated life's big milestones with graduations, weddings, promotions or retirement. Are Canadians finding new reasons to celebrate or mark important moments through travel?

Gagnon: Absolutely. Travel is increasingly becoming the milestone itself, rather than simply the reward for reaching one.

We're still seeing trips tied to birthdays, anniversaries, and family celebrations. But we're also seeing people travel after recovering from illness, following major life transitions, or simply because they recognize a moment that matters.

One of our advisors shared the story of a woman who had lost her husband. Together, they had always planned a particular bucket-list trip but kept postponing it. After his passing, she decided to take the journey on her own. For her, the trip became a way of honouring his memory and bringing closure to an important chapter of her life.

These aren't necessarily traditional milestones. They're deeply personal ones.

Aloise: Of course, prioritizing experiences often means making sacrifices elsewhere. How are Canadians navigating those trade-offs?

Gagnon: Increasingly, they're making deliberate choices about what matters most. Some postpone renovations or discretionary purchases to make room for travel, while others look for more affordable ways to have the experiences they value.

One family, for example, postponed home upgrades to take a final vacation together before their children left for university. As one of our travel advisors put it, “People eventually reach a point where they realize they don't need more stuff.”

“Travel is increasingly becoming the milestone itself, rather than simply the reward for reaching one.”

It's not necessarily about spending more. It's about deciding what deserves priority — and recognizing that memories and connections can be more valuable than the things you accumulate.

That desire to experience life isn't limited to people with large travel budgets. Younger Canadians, in particular, don't want to wait to start living. For travel agencies, the opportunity is to help them find experiences that are accessible, meaningful and suited to their lives.

Aloise: We've talked about Canadians changing their priorities and what they want out of life. How do you see those changing expectations reshaping the future of travel?

Gagnon: It's no longer simply about checking countries off a list. Travellers want experiences that feel meaningful, personal, and connected to who they are. They're looking for opportunities to connect with people, explore their interests, and create memories that endure long after the trip is over.

We're also seeing greater demand for personalization. People want itineraries that reflect their interests, values, and stage of life, and they're willing to invest in the aspects of a trip that matter most to them.

That's changing the role of travel advisors, too. We're moving beyond simply booking trips to helping people create experiences that reflect what they want out of life.

In many ways, travel is becoming less about reaching a destination and more about how people choose to live along the way. And I think that says something much broader about how Canadians are redefining success itself.



***Fernando Aloise** is a Senior Engagement Lead at Ipsos Strategy3 in Canada*

“In many ways, travel is becoming less about reaching a destination and more about how people choose to live along the way.”

The Changing Currency of Status



Craig Patterson

Founder & Publisher,
Retail Insider

A designer handbag. A luxury car. A recognizable logo. For generations, what people owned helped signal how successful they were. But what happens when the same purchase represents achievement to one person, excess to another and an attainable reward to someone priced out of more traditional milestones?

As economic pressures reshape aspirations, the relationship between luxury and success is becoming more complicated. Some consumers still seek the recognition that comes with a prominent label. Others are gravitating toward understated craftsmanship, personalized experiences or purchases that reflect their values rather than simply displaying their wealth.

Craig Patterson, Founder and Publisher of Retail Insider, has spent years observing Canada's evolving retail landscape. We spoke with him about what happens when traditional symbols of success lose their universal meaning, why luxury still matters when bigger milestones feel out of reach, and what might signal that we've made it in the future.

What The Future interview with Craig Patterson

Joannah Connolly: You've watched Canadian retail evolve over many years. What do Canadians' aspirations tell you about how our definition of success is changing?

Craig Patterson: It really depends on the consumer. The economy isn't particularly strong, but some people are still spending on luxury goods. Others are trading down, while we're also seeing greater emphasis on experiences, including high-end restaurants and events.

What's interesting is that displaying extreme wealth doesn't necessarily generate admiration anymore. Social media has sparked more conversations about wealth disparities and the ethics of having so much when others are struggling. An expensive watch or flashy purchase might signal success to one person but seem excessive or even distasteful to another.

And there's an important distinction between looking successful and actually being financially secure. Someone might own a designer handbag or drive an expensive car without having significant savings or financial independence. Meanwhile, someone with considerable wealth and freedom over their time might display very few traditional status symbols. What we see on the outside doesn't necessarily tell us much about how successful someone feels.

Connolly: Luxury purchases have long signalled that you've made it. Are traditional status symbols such as designer clothes, handbags and cars losing their power?

Patterson: I wouldn't say they're losing their power. Luxury is becoming more fragmented. Some consumers still aspire to recognizable brands and prominent logos. Those products continue to sell well at retailers such as Louis Vuitton.

But among some more established luxury shoppers, I'm seeing a preference for less flashy products. Brands such as Brunello Cucinelli are expanding in Canada, appealing through beautiful fabrics and craftsmanship rather than giant logos.

I have a neighbour who was wearing a denim jacket that looked quite ordinary. It could have been Levi's or Zara. But I noticed the buttons and realized it was Brunello Cucinelli. It probably cost a fortune. That's a different kind of status symbol. You have to know what you're looking at.

Quiet luxury isn't necessarily a rejection of status. It's a more selective form of signalling. A prominent logo communicates to almost everyone, while an understated luxury item may only be recognized by those who understand its craftsmanship. Both communicate success, but to different audiences.



Cars illustrate how quickly status symbols can change, too. A Mercedes or BMW was once a fairly exclusive marker of success. Today, financing and leasing have made expensive cars much more commonplace. What once signalled wealth can become almost ordinary.

Consumers are also becoming more aware of what luxury products cost to make compared with their retail prices. That can lead some people to question whether they're really getting value for their money.

Connolly: I wonder, is luxury shifting from something you show other people to something you experience for yourself?

Patterson: For some consumers, absolutely. Particularly at the higher end of the market, there's growing emphasis on craftsmanship, curation and personal service.

Look at what's happening in some of Canada's most interesting luxury stores. Rather than simply browsing and buying, customers work with experienced salespeople who understand their preferences, help build wardrobes and source particular items. Some retailers will even arrange home visits. Others have private shopping spaces where customers can entertain guests or shop for special occasions.

It's about making customers feel that the experience has been designed specifically for them. The product still matters, but so does the attention, exclusivity and service surrounding it. For some consumers, access to something exceptional may be just as meaningful as owning something expensive.

Connolly: With traditional milestones like homeownership increasingly out of reach for many Canadians, could smaller luxury purchases become more meaningful markers of success?

Patterson: Psychologically, I think that's quite possible.

> **When a substantial proportion of your income goes toward rent, buying something you've always wanted can become an important marker of achievement.**

I see people in Toronto wearing designer brands who don't necessarily have the means to support that as an entire lifestyle. In urban environments, where people socialize and are seen, those purchases can become particularly important.

And it doesn't necessarily have to be an expensive handbag. It might be a smaller leather good, a designer wallet or even a beauty product. People still want to reward themselves, and sometimes a smaller purchase becomes a way of doing that.

That doesn't necessarily mean younger consumers have abandoned traditional goals like homeownership. Some may

> **What we see on the outside doesn't necessarily tell us much about how successful someone feels."**

simply be postponing them or prioritizing saving. But I wonder whether, when those larger milestones feel further away, smaller purchases or experiences can provide a more immediate sense of reward. But remember, luxury brands have relied on consumers beyond the genuinely wealthy for decades. Since the 1990s, particularly with the rise of designer handbags, they've increasingly depended on aspirational shoppers.

The handbag was important because it allowed someone to participate in a luxury brand without purchasing an entire wardrobe. That relationship between luxury and aspiration remains important today.

If success means different things to different consumers, which retailers are doing the best job of responding to those changing aspirations?

Patterson: Retailers are starting to think beyond selling products. The most interesting stores create environments and services that make shopping feel special.

Harry Rosen is a great example. Its new flagship store on Cumberland Street in Toronto is beautifully designed, highly curated and focused on personal service. There are private shopping areas where customers can have an entirely different experience. Imagine bringing a wedding party in to be fitted for tuxedos, with a champagne reception and dedicated attention. That's a very different proposition from simply walking into a store to buy a suit.

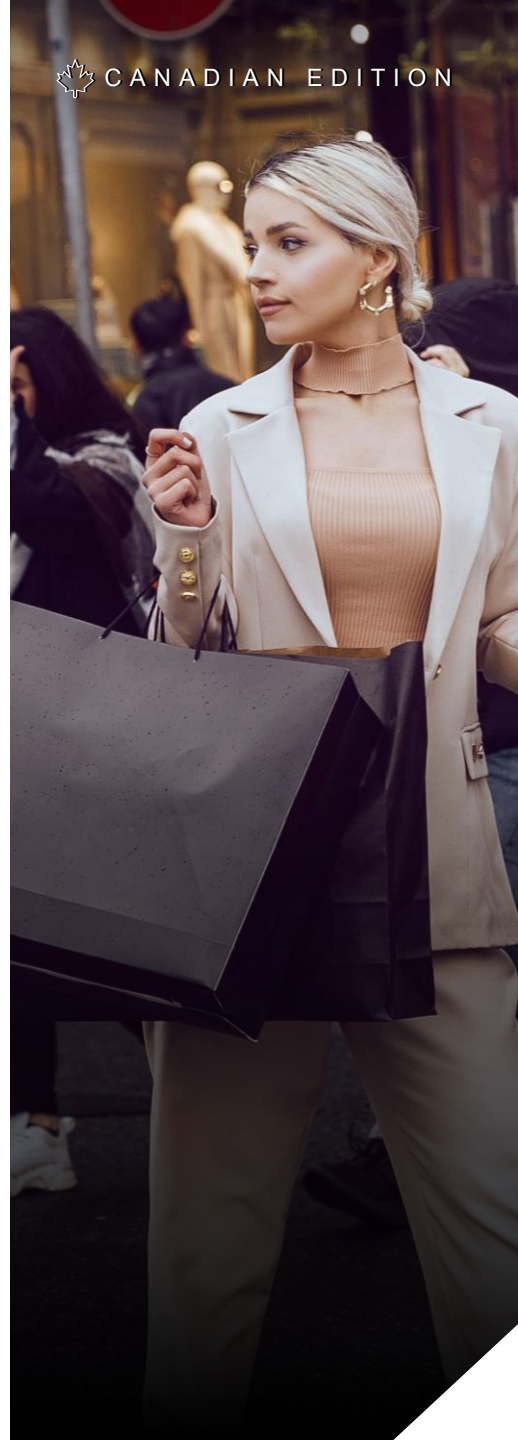
Absolutely Fabrics in Toronto is another interesting example. The architecture is incredible, and the merchandise includes niche luxury brands that even someone familiar with the industry might not recognize. The store has experienced salespeople who work closely with individual clients, sometimes helping them build entire wardrobes.

Connolly: Looking ahead to 2035, what might signal that someone has made it? Will the traditional symbols of success still matter?

Patterson: Honestly, even owning a home could be considered a luxury by then. I suspect we'll see an increasingly divided consumer market, with different people aspiring to very different things.

Some consumers will continue gravitating toward established international luxury brands. Others may place greater value on something handcrafted in Canada by an artisan using traditional techniques. We've already seen how the made-in-Canada movement can shift consumer psychology. People may increasingly want their purchases to demonstrate their values, not just their status.

> **“Some of the most meaningful markers of success in 2035 might be things we can’t easily see.”**



But I wonder whether some of the most meaningful markers of success in 2035 might be things we can't easily see. Having control over your schedule, time to spend with family, privacy or freedom from financial anxiety could become more meaningful measures of success than the possessions traditionally associated with wealth.

Health could become another important part of the luxury conversation. I'm seeing growing interest in wellness, specialized services and longevity. Premium fitness, specialized wellness services and personalized care could increasingly become forms of luxury consumption, reflecting both disposable income and the ability to devote time to oneself. That doesn't mean health itself should be equated with success, but access to certain services may become another expression of privilege and aspiration.

The interesting thing is that there may no longer be one obvious symbol that tells everyone you've made it. What looks like success to one person might mean very little to someone else.

Connolly: If you were advising retailers today, what's the biggest assumption about status or aspiration you'd encourage them to challenge?

Patterson: I'd challenge the idea that the product, however luxurious or aspirational, is enough.

Retailers should think about curating experiences and lifestyles more meaningfully. Why wouldn't Holt Renfrew partner with Four Seasons to create a more complete luxury lifestyle experience, bringing together travel, hospitality, food and retail?

Department stores were once cultural institutions. They offered the best of everything across multiple categories and played a much bigger role in people's lives. There's an opportunity for retailers to rebuild some of that cultural relevance in a different way.

But retailers also have to recognize that consumers don't all define success the same way. Some people will spend $50,000 on designer goods because they want the labels. Others will invest in one beautifully made item they intend to keep for years.

The same purchase can satisfy very different motivations: external recognition, personal reward, or a sense of identity and belonging. For retailers, the challenge is understanding not just what consumers want to own, but what those purchases represent — and who, if anyone, they're trying to impress.



***Joannah Connolly** is Senior Managing Editor at Ipsos Strategy3 in Canada*

Renegotiating the Employer-Employee Bargain



Nora Jenkins Townson

Founder of Bright + Early

Employers want loyalty. Employees want opportunity. But what happens when neither side is convinced the other is holding up their end of the deal? As expectations around ambition, career success and the role of work in our lives shift, the relationship between employers and employees is being put to the test. And as Canadians rethink what it means to succeed at work, is it time to rewrite the rules?

Nora Jenkins Townson, founder of Bright + Early, a Canadian HR consultancy helping organizations rethink their people practices and workplace culture, has a front-row seat to this evolving relationship. She spoke with Grace Tong, Vice President in Ipsos Canada's Employee Experience practice, about changing expectations of work, what Gen Z can teach employers, and how the employer-employee bargain might evolve.

What The Future interview with Nora Jenkins Townson

Grace Tong: Before we explore the future of work, tell us about Bright + Early. What inspired you to start the company, and what challenges are organizations bringing to you today?

Nora Jenkins Townson: I founded Bright + Early in 2017 after working with growing technology companies, including Wealthsimple and FreshBooks. I wanted to help organizations build great places to work by taking a more thoughtful, human-centred approach to HR.

Today, we work with technology companies, nonprofits, creative businesses and other mission-driven organizations. For smaller companies, we often act as their embedded HR team, supporting everything from hiring and onboarding to compensation and career development. We also help organizations rethink those systems, using a design-thinking approach to create better experiences for employees.

Grace Tong: You're seeing these changes firsthand across a range of organizations. What's changing most fundamentally in the bargain between employers and employees?

Nora Jenkins Townson: I think the fundamental contract of what work is, and what employers and employees owe each other, has been up for negotiation for several years. The pandemic was particularly disruptive. There was this understanding that if you worked hard, your organization would reward you. You'd stay with one employer, grow your career, and as the economy grew, your life would get better. That's not what's happening anymore.

Remote work was a major disrupting factor, but I don't think it created entirely new expectations. It removed some of the social pressure to perform in a certain way. People already wanted more control over how they worked, to find meaning in their jobs, and to see tangible benefits from their efforts rather than simply working toward some distant promise of success.

What changed was people's willingness to challenge traditional expectations. They're now asking for more transparency. How does compensation work? How does advancement work? What am I actually working toward?

And now AI is adding another layer of disruption, particularly as it changes the kinds of jobs available to people entering the workforce. At the same time, we're seeing more individualized career paths, with people taking greater responsibility for navigating their own careers rather than relying on a single employer to provide a path forward. All of this is fundamentally changing what employees can expect from organizations, and what organizations can expect from them.



Tong: That brings us to Gen Z. Our research suggests younger Canadians still value financial success, but they're also placing greater importance on work-life balance and control over their time. Are they less ambitious than previous generations, or are they redefining what a successful career looks like?

Jenkins Townson: I think they're redefining it. Gen Z has a strong desire for meaningful work and meaningful pay. They want to do good in the world, but they're less willing to follow the traditional social contract around work. Sometimes employers interpret that as a professionalism problem. They think younger employees don't understand the culture or aren't willing to pay their dues.

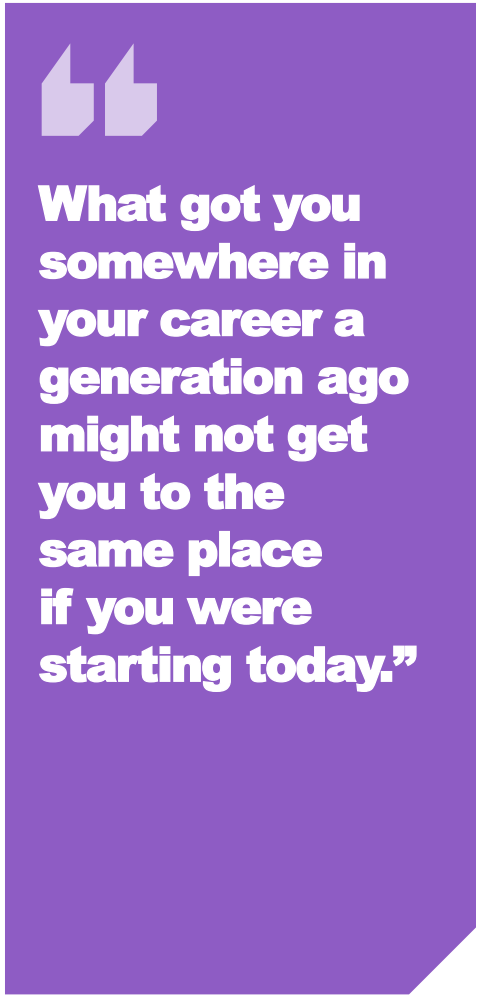
But the organizations getting it right recognize that these are smart, ambitious people who want clarity. They want to know how to make more money, how to grow their careers and what specific steps they need to take. They're willing to work incredibly hard during their working hours, but they also want to clock out afterward. They don't necessarily want to linger at their desks to demonstrate commitment. It's a less performative way of working. They want to be efficient and ambitious, but they want their time off, too.

Tong: That must create some tension with leaders who built their careers under a very different set of expectations. How are employers navigating that generational divide?

Jenkins Townson: For leaders who built their careers a certain way, it can require a real mindset shift. I have empathy for that. They want to mentor younger people and share what worked for them. But what got you somewhere in your career a generation ago might not get you to the same place if you were starting today. It requires empathy on both sides and a willingness to re-examine our beliefs about work.

Tong: You mentioned AI earlier. As technology reshapes the kinds of jobs available to people entering the workforce, is it also changing what it takes to build a successful career?

Jenkins Townson: We're starting to see how AI could enable organizations to operate with smaller teams, fewer administrative roles and greater expectations placed on individual contributors. There's this idea of the "super individual contributor" — someone who isn't simply carrying out assigned tasks but is thinking strategically about what needs to be accomplished, using technology to solve problems and taking greater ownership of the outcomes. Interestingly, I think Gen Z is quite well suited to that environment. Their tendency to question things, to tinker and to understand how things work could be a real advantage. We're moving away from training people to perform specific repetitive tasks and toward needing people who can think critically and



strategically. And that extends to how they manage their careers. There's less stability, for better or worse, and more pressure on individuals to decide where they want to go and how they'll get there.

Tong: If AI is changing the entry-level work through which people traditionally gained experience, how can employers help young workers develop the judgment and skills they'll need to succeed?

Jenkins Townson: I encourage students to experiment while they're still in school. Beyond co-op placements and traditional work experience, try building something. Get your hands dirty and understand how a business works beyond one particular function. Employers have a role to play, too. We've designed onboarding programs where employees spend time across different departments to develop a more holistic understanding of the business. I've also worked with organizations where everyone, from junior employees to executives, spends time answering customer support calls so they can better understand the problems the organization is trying to solve.

Wealthsimple, where I worked before starting Bright + Early, experimented with asking candidates for certain entry-level roles to build something interesting using AI rather than going through a traditional interview process. I don't know how successful that experiment ultimately was, but it's an interesting example of focusing on what candidates can create rather than simply assessing their qualifications.

Tong: Let's turn to employers. With layoffs and a tougher job market shifting the balance of power back toward organizations, is there a risk that employers will stop investing in the employee experience?

Jenkins Townson: I think some already are, and that's a strategic mistake. With more people looking for work, some organizations feel they don't need to invest as heavily in being a great place to work. But when you're operating with a smaller team in a tighter economy, you need everyone working together effectively. Clear expectations, well-designed performance systems, transparent compensation and career development aren't separate from business strategy. They support it. And employees will remember the organizations and leaders that continued to value them when times were difficult. That's what inspires the long-term loyalty employers often say they're missing.

Tong: We often think of employee well-being and belonging in terms of programs and benefits. But our research suggests the way work is designed can be just as important. Are employers focusing on the wrong things?

> **Clear expectations, transparent compensation and career development aren't separate from business strategy. They support it."**

Jenkins Townson: I think organizations sometimes start with the symptoms rather than the underlying systems. An organization might want to become more inclusive, so it starts with an employee resource group or a new hiring initiative.

Those can be wonderful, but first you need to look at what's systemic. If your promotion or performance systems have fundamental bias built into them, an employee resource group isn't going to fix that.

It's similar with well-being. You can offer wellness programs and speakers, but if the work itself is designed in a way that constantly leads to burnout or overtime, those programs can actually create frustration. You need to fix the fundamentals first.

Tong: Compensation is another interesting tension. Employees want meaningful work and flexibility, but they also want to earn more. How important is transparency about pay in this new employer-employee relationship?

Jenkins Townson: Massively important. People increasingly want to understand not just what a role pays, but why it pays that amount and how those decisions are made. Organizations need a clear compensation philosophy. What are we rewarding? How do people progress? How does compensation reflect our values?

We've found that employees' understanding of compensation decisions is connected to engagement. Sometimes the answer isn't redesigning the entire compensation system. It's explaining how it works.

When people understand the rationale and feel it's fair, that can make a significant difference. It's about treating employees like adults and being transparent about the exchange.

Tong: As employees redefine what success means to them, what do employers need to change to create workplaces where people can thrive?

Jenkins Townson: Get very clear on your values and your employee value proposition and then make sure those show up in every aspect of the employee experience. Your values should be reflected in how you hire people, how you compensate them, how you promote them and what behaviours you reward.

It's not a new concept, but it's something organizations need to continually revisit as expectations change. You can't just define your values, put them on a wall and assume the work is done. You have to build them into the systems and decisions that shape people's everyday experience at work.



***Grace Tong** is a Vice President in Ipsos Canada's Employee Experience practice*



78%

of Canadians agree career success isn't worth sacrificing their health or relationships for.

Source:
What The Future Success survey conducted October 27 – 29, 2026 by Ipsos (n= 1,000 Canadian adults)

From Ambition to Reality: Helping Canadians Navigate New Paths to Success



Andrew Greenlaw

Senior Vice President of Brand,
Community and Client Experience at CIBC

Ambition has long been a driving force behind the Canadian Dream. But what does ambition look like today? For some, it's about reaching familiar milestones like education, career advancement or homeownership. For others, it's about building something of their own, finding greater purpose or creating a life that reflects what matters most to them. As Canadians rethink what success means, their ambitions are becoming more personal and diverse — and less tied to a single path.

For CIBC, ambition has been central to its purpose since its founding in 1867 and became the focus of its brand platform, Ambitions Made Real, in 2021. We sat down with CIBC's Andrew Greenlaw to discuss the many forms ambition can take, how Canadians' aspirations evolve throughout their lives, and why the desire to move forward remains remarkably resilient, even in uncertain times.

What The Future interview with Andrew Greenlaw

Diane Ridgway-Cross: CIBC has built its brand around Ambitions Made Real. What led you to ambition as the central idea, and what did you recognize about Canadians that made it resonate?

Andrew Greenlaw: Let me take you back to 1867, when we were founded as the Canadian Bank of Commerce, just weeks before Confederation. At that point, there was a real need for domestic capital to flow into our country and into key sectors, and our bank was at the forefront of that. What was true then remains true today, and that is CIBC's unwavering commitment to Canadian ambition and our clients here at home and globally. Our stated purpose is 'to help make your ambition a reality'. We reclaimed our purpose in 2019, and we are deeply committed to helping Canadians achieve their ambitions. It anchors everything we do, from our commitment to our clients and our culture through to the creative expression of our brand.

At the heart of that purpose is a simple idea: banking should connect to what people are striving for every single day, why they get out of bed every morning.

It reflects something deeply human and genuinely Canadian, which is this desire to move forward. And what's interesting is that, when we talk to Canadians, we hear that ambition isn't just about big achievements in life. It's about things that are personal and building a life that matters to you.

That human truth gave us a brand platform with broad appeal, deep relevance and a powerful emotional resonance.

Ridgway-Cross: One of the things we're exploring in this report is how differently Canadians define success. How do you think about ambition when it can mean something entirely different to a 22-year-old starting out and a 70-year-old entering retirement?

Greenlaw: Through our work over the years, we've really come to appreciate that ambition looks different for everyone. It depends on who you are, what you value, your stage of life and your circumstances at any given moment. Certainly, the economic environment and the broader world we're living in today also play into that. The ambition itself may be unique and deeply personal, but we all share a desire to move forward and strive for better.

When we think about ambition, we often think about the milestones we hear about most: post-secondary education, homeownership, successful careers. But there's a tremendous mosaic of ambitions that we see every single day. We have a client who's a country music singer who recently sold out Massey Hall, and a couple who bought a

“There's a tremendous mosaic of ambitions that we see every single day.”

flower farm on Vancouver Island because they wanted to follow a dream and create a legacy for their family. Those are very different ambitions, but each represents something deeply meaningful to the people pursuing them and that's something we can all relate to.

Ridgway-Cross: Those are great examples of how personal ambition can be. You've made real client stories a central part of Ambitions Made Real. How do you find those stories, and are there any that have particularly stayed with you?

Greenlaw: Most of the stories come directly from our relationship managers across the country. They're the ones who get to know clients on a very deep and personal level. That gives the marketing team the difficult job of deciding which stories to tell. What's particularly powerful to me is that most of the people featured in our brand ads are actual CIBC clients. They're proud of what they've achieved, they value the relationships they've built with their advisor, and they know their stories might inspire someone else to take the next step toward realizing an ambition of their own.

Two stories come to mind. The first is Julie and Jeremy, who founded a Canadian clothing brand called Province of Canada. What's interesting about their story is that it started as a side hustle. They loved this country and believed there was an opportunity to make clothing here that really reflected Canada. But turning that passion into a business was a big leap, especially with a growing family and all the financial demands that come with it. We were able to help give them the confidence to take that step. And today, they've built this wonderful business with multiple stores and a growing brand. Full credit to Julie and Jeremy for what they've built.



Julie and Jeremy, founders of Canadian clothing brand Province of Canada, are among the real clients featured in CIBC's Ambitions Made Real campaign.

The other story that really stays with me is about a young man named Sam. He describes being on the autism spectrum as having a superpower, and when you meet him, you understand why. Through Community Living Toronto, an organization supported by the CIBC Foundation, Sam was able to get his first job. He describes that as the moment that changed his life. It gave him confidence, helped him develop new skills, and today he's become an advocate for marginalized communities. What really struck me was something his mom said. She described how the support Sam received had given him, in her words, **"more life."** I think that's such a powerful way to describe what realizing an ambition can mean.

Ridgway-Cross: I'm curious how your thinking has evolved since you launched Ambitions Made Real in 2021. We've been through a lot of economic and social change since then. Has any of that changed the way you think about ambition?

Greenlaw: The world feels like it evolves every single day. And those changes directly affect our clients and how they may be feeling about their ability to achieve their ambitions. What's really clear, though, is that even with some headwinds, people's commitment to their ambitions remains remarkably strong. There's this beautiful resilience about Canadian ambition that has persisted over time, even as the paths to achieving it have become less linear.

People have to be adaptable because the journey doesn't always unfold as imagined.

It's not always as straightforward as saving for a house or graduating from university and finding a job. That's why we developed the CIBC Ambitions Index almost three years ago, research conducted in partnership with Ipsos. It helps us understand what Canadians aspire to, how confident they feel about achieving their goals and how those ambitions are evolving.

Ridgway-Cross: Of course, there's another side to this. Some of the traditional markers of success feel increasingly out of reach for many Canadians. How do you help people pursue their ambitions when the economic realities are working against them?

Greenlaw: *Ambitions Made Real* is a powerful promise, and that comes with real responsibility. If you can't deliver your purpose, you lose the connection with your clients. For us, it means not talking about ambition only in an abstract form. It means helping people make meaningful progress every single day and celebrating that progress along the way.

“There's this beautiful resilience about Canadian ambition that has persisted over time, even as the paths to achieving it have become less linear.”

Sometimes the journey toward an ambition can feel a bit lonely, particularly when the path forward isn't clear. That's where having a financial partner can make a difference. There's so much financial advice out there today, but it can be overwhelming to navigate, and much of it is too generic to address your own circumstances. A big part of our relationship managers' job is getting to know people, understanding what's important to them and providing the right guidance, advice and solutions. Ultimately, it's about giving people the confidence to pursue whatever their ambitions are.

Ridgway-Cross: Looking ahead, what gives you confidence that Canadian ambition will remain resilient?

Greenlaw: What I find inspiring is that even during some of the more challenging times, Canadians have a steadfast commitment to their ambitions. There's a resilience and a real desire to continue pursuing them.

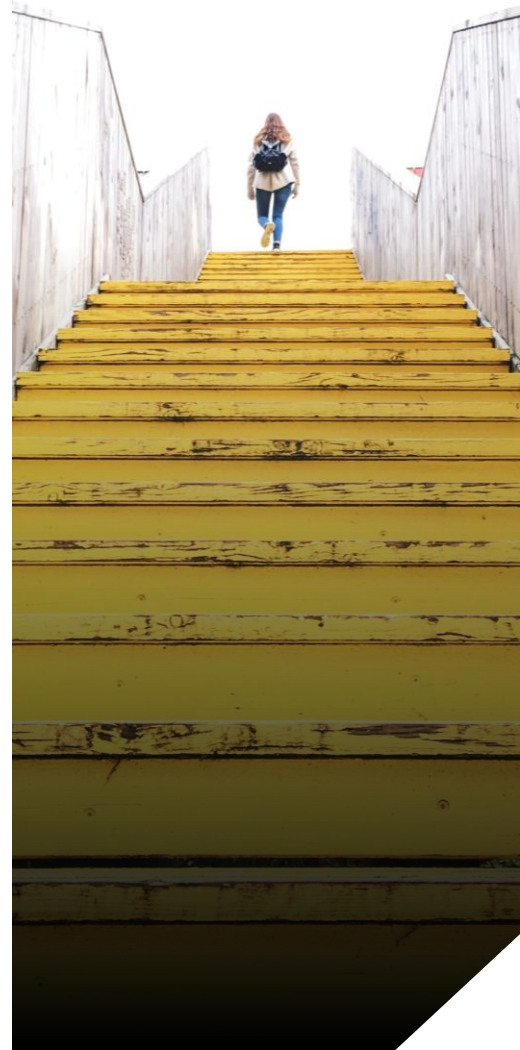
We all go through difficult periods, whether they're related to our family, our career or what's happening in the world around us.

> **I really believe that when your ambitions feel out of reach, that's when having someone in your corner becomes most important.**

When I look at our country's history and where we are today, I'm incredibly proud to be Canadian. We've persevered through challenging times, and I believe that determination to keep moving forward will continue to define us.



Diane Ridgway-Cross *leads Ipsos Strategy3's Canadian practice and is the managing editor for What The Future Canada*



Questions for the future



Retail & consumer brands

As homeownership, marriage and traditional family formation shift or disappear, could entire retail categories face structural decline?

As Canadians increasingly value travel, hobbies and time with loved ones, will retailers find themselves competing for spending that might once have gone toward possessions?

What if the biggest threat to retail isn't declining spending, but a generation that stops believing buying things will make them happier?



Luxury & status

As AI, counterfeits and digital identities make status increasingly easy to manufacture, could invisibility become the ultimate expression of exclusivity?

Could luxury brands that were built on conspicuous consumption lose their relevance in a world where status is increasingly expressed through discretion, independence and freedom?



Financial services

What happens to the business of helping people get ahead when a growing number no longer believe they can?

If wealth increasingly depends on what you're born into rather than what you earn, how will banks rethink the customers and life stages around which they've built their businesses?

What if retirement stops being the reward for a successful career — and becomes something people take throughout their lives?



Education & the future of work

If AI can do the work people spent years learning to do, what will education — and expertise — actually be worth?

What happens to ambition when climbing the career ladder no longer guarantees a better life, and younger workers increasingly question whether the climb is worth it?

If the next generation no longer defines success by their job title, how will employers attract, motivate and retain people who don't aspire to climb the ladder?



Travel, leisure & recreation

Could the travel bucket list become the next rat race? As experiences replace possessions as markers of success, will travel become another arena for competition, comparison and status anxiety?

As experiences become increasingly central to how Canadians define success, could travel and leisure become the next great divide between the haves and have-nots?

As Canadians face growing pressure to succeed, could the ultimate vacation be one where there's nothing to achieve?

See what's next

The Future of Success is just one piece of a much bigger story. **Ipsos Strategy3's Trends & Foresight practice helps organizations decode the forces shaping tomorrow, anticipate disruption, and activate new growth strategies.**

From global trend scans to future scenarios to activation workshops, we work with organizations to translate foresight into action. Let's explore what the future holds for your customers, your category, and your business.

CONTACT US

AI generated image