



Skills Canada BC

Best Practices

Leading Through a Pandemic

March 2020 to September 2021

(DRAFT)

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Introduction

On March 13, 2020, Skills Canada BC (SCBC) announced that it would be cancelling its Provincials 2020, scheduled to be hosted at the Tradex, in Abbotsford, BC, on April 13, 2020. The coronavirus had set off a worldwide pandemic. As infection rates were rising quickly in the province, the BC Health Authority began mandating the shutdown of events with crowds bigger than 250 people. In the months that followed, schools opened and closed, and much uncertainty prevailed. Throughout 2020 and 2021 SCBC continued to work closely with its partners to plan Regional, Provincial, and National competitions. In 2021, many SCBC competitions were held remotely or virtually. Those who held in-person events did so within the confines of school cohorts and pre-approved socially distanced spaces.

Morale

Business leaders have identified that keeping up morale among employees has been the biggest challenge they faced during the pandemic. As the number of Covid 19 cases rose and fell throughout 2020 and 2021 so did uncertainty about job security, the timing of the recovery, business solvency and the ongoing realities of operational shutdowns and reopening of schools and businesses. Often, SCBC staff dealt with demoralized educators and industry partners who were uncertain about what they would be facing on a day-to-day basis.

The Ever-Changing Workplace

Covid 19 redefined the workplace for many workers. Those tasked with supervising staff had to learn how to manage homebased workers and productivity. Perhaps the biggest workplace reallocation issues have involved workers with children. Parents who had to supervise children and perform their normal work duties struggled to work in noisy and sometimes chaotic conditions. Throughout 2020 and 2021 SCBC needed to be mindful of scheduling meetings that could accommodate the everchanging workplaces and schedules of its partners.

Return to Work Planning - SCBC Stakeholders

As we head into September 2021 business leaders are challenged with creating safety plans for the safe return of their staff to the workplace. While many employees identify wanting to feel safe at work, businesses risk losing valuable staff who now want the ability to work from home. Finding the right combination of remote work and working onsite will continue to challenge business leaders as we head into 2022. SCBC didn't experience any interruption to its operations vis-a-vie worksite relocation for its employees. This is because although SCBC has office space in Burnaby, its employees are scattered throughout the province and mostly work remotely.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty about the ongoing duration of the pandemic, the strength of the economy and the unknown impact Covid 19 will have on the markets continues to plague the business community. Normal forecasting tools have become less predictable and pre-pandemic strategic and business plans have lost their relevance. SCBC feels the impact of uncertainty the most when planning competitions, and booking venues for events and competitions for future dates.

Forecasting & Stakeholders

Business leaders today must rely on the data and information they can gather to make informed decisions surrounding revenue and growth forecasts. Simultaneously, they must also look towards the future to see if there are any imminent changes on the landscape that could impact operations. Forecasting challenges are present with educators and industry partners alike. SCBC implemented monthly zoom calls with different stakeholder groups to stay informed and gather information relevant to decision-making.

The Role of Technology

The important role that technology has played in managing operations remotely during the pandemic cannot be overstated. During the pandemic SCBC was able to manage its operations effectively vis-a-vie daily, weekly, and monthly zoom calls with staff, board, Regional Coordinators, Provincial and National Tech Chairs, as well as government, labour and industry partners. Technology also played a key role in delivering competitions. Judges and proctors that couldn't physically attend competitions were able to participate using technology and innovation.

Website

To enhance communications among all stakeholders SCBC increased the number of documents and communiques it uploaded to its website. For example, notifications about Nationals (Virtuals) 2021 and WorldSkills 2022, Covid-19 Safety protocols, were regularly posted on the SCBC website. As a result, during the pandemic Regional Coordinators and Provincial/National Tech Chairs identified the SCBC website as the "go to" website to stay informed on upcoming events and competitions.

Inspire – Open-Source Learning Portal

Skills BC created the *Inspire Open-Source Learning Portal* at the onset of the pandemic so that the Inspire learning tools could be available to educators and students during school shutdowns. Additionally, despite considerable setbacks in accessing classrooms the Inspire program was delivered in-person with the incredible support of the South Island Partnership.

Online Challenges

April 2020 SCBC launched its first *Online Challenge* that students could do from home. SCBC wanted to stay connected with students and educators during the lockdown and the online challenges proved to be ideal for SCBC to promote its programs and competitions by launching regular online challenges. The online challenges provided opportunities for SCBC to engage many of its stakeholders in many new roles that included designing, judging and sponsoring the online challenges.

Digital Marketing Tools

During the pandemic SCBC built out its digital communications arm and sent out weekly, bi-weekly, sometimes daily eblasts, to its email distribution list comprised of students, educators, parents, labour, industry and government partners. SCBC's email list grew from 5,000 tagged contacts to 10,300+ contacts between March 2020 and August 2021.

Revenue & Expenses

SCBC was in a good position in terms of having low monthly expenses when the pandemic hit. Given that Telus provides free office space allows SCBC to save on many other expenses including internet, telephone, security, janitorial, building insurance, pest control and hydro, just to name a few. All in all, SCBC saves \$80,000 – 100,000 per year by having its offices inside the Telus building at 3777 Kingsway in Burnaby. Having low monthly and annual expenses was especially important during the pandemic given that sponsorship and government revenue was down 50 – 70%.

Specifics

- Low operating expenses were beneficial during the downturned economy. (No monthly leases and related expenses to pay.)
- Sponsorship revenue decreased dramatically (70%).
- Wage subsidy implemented by the federal government contributed (60 – 85%) of staff wages (depending on ESDC payment cycles.)
- SCBC took advantage of interest free \$40,000 federal government loan as only \$30,000 needed to be repaid.
- No travel expenses for staff or board were incurred.

Regionals 2020 & 2021

On March 20, 2020, SCBC finished its last Regional 2020 competition and had put through almost 5,000 competitors in these competitions. But, one day after completing its Regionals 2020 competitions, on March 13, 2020, Skills BC announced it would be cancelling its Provincials 2020, scheduled to be held at the Tradex, in Abbotsford, on April 13, 2020. With the news of the fast-spreading coronavirus, government health authorities began strict mandates on the number of people who were allowed to gather.

Throughout 2020 and 2021 SCBC worked with its Regional Coordinators to find ways to host its Regionals 2021 competitions. Hosting monthly zoom calls with Regional Coordinators allowed SCBC to work with educators and host partners resulting in the highest number of competitors ever put through SCBC competitions. The Regional 2021 competition season was expanded from being held in February and March to January to May. Working with a mixture of remote, virtual, in-person and classroom cohorts, Skills BC reported hosting 10,750 competitors in its Regionals 2021 competitions.

Provincials 2020 & 2021

In 2020, SCBC cancelled its Provincials 2020 competitions. For the remainder of the year Skills BC hosted monthly zoom calls with Provincial Tech Chairs to develop a plan for hosting the Provincials 2021. Despite many setbacks to hosting Provincial 2021 competitions SCBC managed to host 211 competitors in 18 competitions areas that were held virtually and remotely, around the province. By comparison SCBC hosted 650 competitors in its competitions in 2019.

Nationals 2020 & 2021

On March 16, 2020, Skills Competence Canada announced it was cancelling its National 2020 competition scheduled for the end of May in Vancouver. Then, for the rest of 2020 and into 2021, the National Office met with the Member Organizations on regular zoom calls to plan how to host the Nationals 2021. In November 2020, the decision was made to cancel the Nationals 2021 in Quebec City. Once this decision was made the logistics of hosting the Nationals 2021 virtually began. In the end, the Nationals 2021 was a virtual event. Most of the Member Organizations participated but competitor numbers were low. SCBC had 25 competitors who competed in the Nationals (Virtuals) 2021 and won a total of 18 medals.

Online Competitions

In April 2021, SCBC launched its first Online Challenge that students could do from home. Over time, SCBC launched regular Online Challenges that grew in popularity. SCBC alumni, provincial and national tech chairs stepped in to help create scope documents and judge the submissions. Challenge winners were promoted over SCBC social media channels and through eblasts. The Online Challenges played an integral role in helping SCBC grow its email distribution list and promote SCBC to students, parents, and educators during the pandemic.

WorldSkills 2021 & 2022

As the pandemic persisted worldwide, WorldSkills International announced in November 2020 that the WorldSkills 2021 competition, scheduled to be held in Shanghai, China, would be postponed until 2022. Early into 2021, WorldSkills International announced it had rescheduled WorldSkills 2021 for October 12 – 17, 2022.

Governance

The Skills BC Executive and Finance Committees met early in March 2020 to discuss impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on SCBC's upcoming Provincials and Nationals 2020. The board provided input and guidance to the Executive Director on working with government and industry partners prior to announcing the cancellation of the Provincials 2020. Later in March 2020, the board convened a special meeting to discuss impact of pandemic and pass a revised budget for the remainder of the fiscal year.

Recommendations

- Continue regular zoom calls to maintain effective communication among staff and contractors.
- Continue regular zoom calls among Regional Coordinators, Provincial and National Tech Chairs to share and gather information.
- Continue regular zoom calls with National Office and Member Organizations to share and gather information.
- Continue to deliver Online Challenges to grow awareness about Skills BC programs and competitions.
- Continue to follow up on sponsorship opportunities, pivoting as needed to align with the everchanging landscape with customizable sponsorship opportunities.

- Continue with Alumni Engagement and Special Projects, videos, interviews and special live sessions with targeted groups.
- Continue with regular Social Media outreach and contests.
- Continue involvement with Trade Show outreach connecting with relevant stakeholders (BCTEA, CES, ASTTBC, BCWITT, SFTA).
- Continue to review of technology, registration systems, online waivers to facilitate competitions, in-school programs and online challenges.

Conclusion

On March 13, 2020, when SCBC announced it was cancelling the Provincials 2020 no one had any idea how long the pandemic would last or what its impact would be on the organization. Infection rates rose then fell, only to rise again. Keeping current with shutdowns and restrictions on doing business became a mainstay of the operation. Despite many setbacks SCBC developed its capacity and resiliency as an organization. In the months ahead it is possible that interruptions to normal activities will continue to prevail. But, given SCBC's ability to stay connected with key stakeholders, grow its contact lists and forge new partnerships, the organization will continue to meet its mandate of introducing careers in the skilled trades and technology sectors to youth throughout the province.