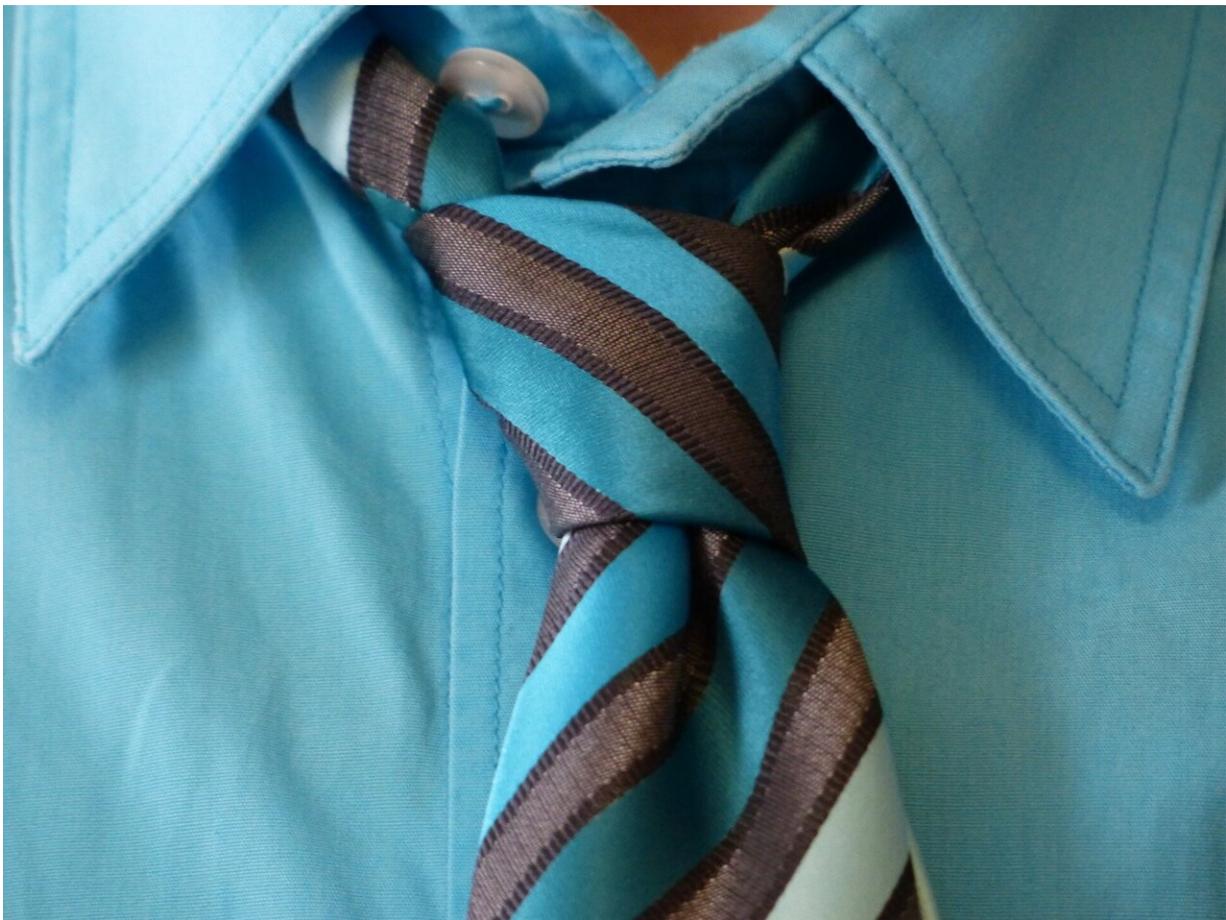


Out with the old: Blue- and white-collar job labels aren't cutting it anymore, says researcher

May 19 2024, by Nachum Gabler



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The old way of classifying jobs as blue- or white-collar is no longer relevant in Canada's modern labor market. Our 21st century economy and [workforce](#) are [too complex](#) to boil jobs and work categories down to a simple blue- or white-collar contrast.

The first use of white collar to describe those in non-manual labor jobs dates back to the 1910s. [Blue collar](#), as a [contrasting label](#) for manual workers, was coined a bit later, in the 1920s.

But nowadays, our shirt colors do not signal the nature of our jobs, sectors, industries, professions—or anything to do with more subjective, yet very real, sentiments related to work prestige, hierarchy or socio-economic status.

Several industry experts have remarked that hanging onto these [outdated labels distorts the true picture](#) of the [kinds of jobs](#) that are available to young Canadians, now and in the future, and the types of skills that will be in demand and are worth investing in.

It's time to retire the outdated contrast of blue- and white-collar jobs. Instead, we need a new taxonomy that's more sophisticated and updated—one that can better describe the different types of jobs and workers that make up Canada's modern labor market.

Canada's changing labor market

The [shifting nature of work in Canada—and around the world—over the past five decades](#) underscores how inadequate traditional job classifications are for categorizing the diversity of modern-day

occupations and careers.

Influential organizations like the [World Bank](#), [the International Labor Organization](#) and the [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) have raised concerns about the future of work, especially in the face of rapid technological advancements.

And traditional [full-time](#), permanent positions have given way to temporary, [part-time](#) and self-employed positions in many economic sectors, and [large industry transitions are already underway](#) due to changes in automation and renewable energy.

The changing nature of work has wide-ranging implications across various policy areas, one of which is the blurring of traditional work distinctions and the creation of new and novel jobs.

It's clear the work categories of the past are no longer adequate—there is a need for a more nuanced approach for understanding and categorizing jobs. One proposal is to move away from rigid blue- and white-collar distinctions, toward a more flexible system.

A newer, improved taxonomy

A [2022 report I published with the Conference Board of Canada](#) proposes a new, richer, more flexible taxonomy for jobs and work that better reflects Canada's current labor market.

Using simple machine learning, I analyzed 500 different jobs listed under the National Occupation Classification system, and the overall similarity of skills, abilities, and needed knowledge that characterize each of those jobs.

From this analysis, I came up with eight new and distinct areas of work

that provide a more up-to-date way for thinking about Canada's modern labor market. The eight new types of jobs are:

1. Doers, which include jobs like cashiers, light-duty cleaners, nursery and greenhouse workers, pet groomers and store shelf stockers.
2. Builders, which include occupations like bricklayers, concrete finishers, longshore workers, and roofers and shinglers.
3. Supervisors, which include jobs like coaches, and supervisors of petroleum, gas and chemical processing and utilities.
4. Knowledge workers, which include occupations like [investment analysts](#), economists, researchers and analysts, pharmacists and [secondary school](#) teachers.
5. STEM professionals, which include jobs like chemists, computer network technicians and numerous engineering roles.
6. Personal services, which include jobs like data entry clerks, legal administrative assistants and retail salespersons.
7. Technical trades, which include occupations like boilermakers, carpenters, industrial electricians and tool and die makers.
8. Non-technical trades, which include jobs like hair stylists and barbers, photographers, printing press operators and sports referees.

The modern working world

This new taxonomy is more complicated than the old blue-and-white collar contrast, but that's exactly the point.

Canada's modern labor market, with its countless job titles—from social media influencers to full-stack developers to investment advisors to restaurant managers—means we need a better way to categorize jobs in a way that reflects how complicated our modern working world has become.

Doing so could help students and young workers better understand what kinds of jobs will be on offer, and what types of skills will be most useful, as they think about and eventually start their future careers.

A new jobs taxonomy would help structure and organize those complexities, instead of trying to shoehorn them into an outdated blue-and-white collar paradigm.

Canadian workers, both currently employed and those who fill the ranks in the future, could benefit from knowing where they fit into the labor market, what kinds of jobs they can fill or [transition to based on their core skill sets](#). My work T-shirt just doesn't jibe with either collar color anymore.

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