



## A SPACE TO THINK DIFFERENTLY AND MAKE IDEAS HAPPEN

### ABOUT THE ACTION LAB

The Action Lab is a social enterprise of Skills Society; an internationally recognized leader in social innovation and one of the largest disability service organizations in Edmonton - <https://skillsociety.ca/action-lab/>

There isn't anything quite like the Action Lab in western Canada. The Action Lab experience promotes creative problem solving, offers tools to help tap into collective wisdom and helps people design solutions to challenges they are working on.

### THE ACTION LAB STANDS ON THREE PILLARS:

**SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB:** Stewardship of multi-month to multi year deep dive processes to navigate complex social issues and co-design solutions with stakeholders.

**FACILITATION AND WORKSHOPS:** If you need facilitation of strategic planning and visioning we have amazing people who can design and facilitate a session to suit your needs.

**THE SPACE:** Edmonton's most unique venue that you can rent for private events, workshops, meetings, strategic planning and more engaging collaboration.

### DIFFERENT LAB APPROACHES FOR DIFFERENT KINDS OF CHALLENGES

Our approaches have evolved over the years from Action Lab key leader and founder Ben Weinlick's graduate research around think tanks in social service design and a mix of practical social innovation lab approaches captured in **THINK JAR COLLECTIVE'S SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB FIELD GUIDE**. We recognize there is not one lab process approach to apply in all situations. We work with all our clients and identified stakeholders to uncover the right approach based on how complex a challenge is, how much time is possible and capacity in the system to engage in a lab process. Below are some examples of approaches.

In all social innovation labs we steward—from single day, to multi month, to multi year labs—we customize the lab approach for the specific context and needs.

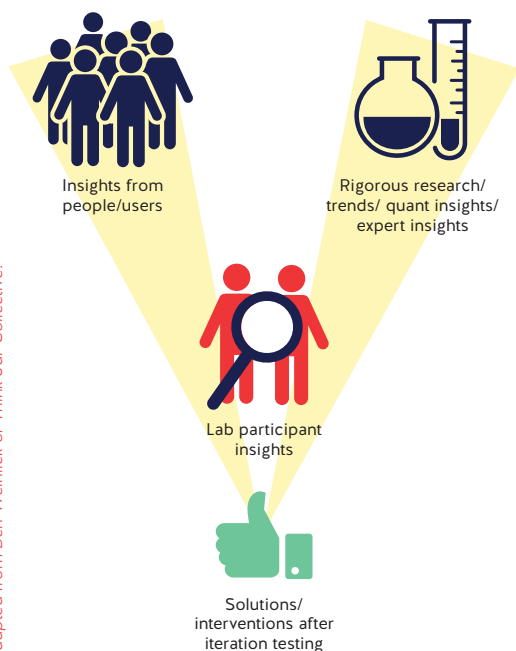
### UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES AND APPROACH

**KEY PRINCIPLES OF OUR APPROACH ARE BASED IN SYSTEMIC DESIGN-MIXING SYSTEMS AND DESIGN THINKING.** This approach involves people with lived experience of a complex challenge in the research and design of proposed solutions. It also involves literature reviews, interviews, learning by hanging out with people in context (ethnography), design methods like prototyping, journey mapping and systems mapping to look at root causes. In some of our labs (Edmonton Shift Lab) we also center Indigenous knowledge by equitably involving Indigenous leaders, and Elders in the creation and delivery of a lab process. These methods create rich engagements that foster collaborative problem solving, honor lived experiences and help shape more relevant solution finding.

## IN MOST LABS THERE ARE GENERALLY INSIGHTS COMING TOGETHER FROM 3 MAIN PERSPECTIVES

1. Insights from people experiencing a challenge
2. Insights from lab participants as they make sense of the issue and learn from the research findings
3. Insights from literature and rigorous research

The tricky thing is the sense making to bring insights together, identify real and imagined constraints, and shape interventions, policies, and services that could help. In our labs we strive to bring together not just one insight area but develop holistic explorations that matter.



## HUMAN CENTERED DESIGN THINKING APPROACH

Human Centered Design Thinking(HCD) is an established approach to collaborative problem solving and is practiced throughout the world in large and small organizations in the private, non-profit and public sectors. HCD mainly helps with the on-the-ground people perspectives and insights from lived experience. The key to HCD is that it helps teams co-design solutions with deep stakeholder insights, rather than creating solutions that don't work because of siloed perspectives. With deeper people insights, teams can develop solutions that better meet real needs. Being better at meeting needs of people in a system can lead to efficiencies, and increased meaning and value in proposed solutions.

Design thinking fundamentals include activities such as:

- ▶ Mixed qualitative and quantitative research to understand people in context
- ▶ Co-design - designing with people rather than simply for people
- ▶ Participation and co-creation of new opportunities with the people involved
- ▶ Rapid prototyping to make ideas real and test small bets before big bets
- ▶ Visual communication, to clarify and create shared understanding

## SYSTEMS THINKING APPROACH

Systems Thinking is about the big picture view of a challenge and methods to explore what might be underlying root causes to complex issues.

*"There is a tricky tension to navigate when trying to impact deep positive change around a complex issue. It's the tension between focusing too much on helping make change at an individual level, with the need to step back and look at the big picture. With systemic challenges, we need to look at what's potentially causing a problem for not just one person who encounters it but for many"*

Ben Weinlick, Think Jar Collective Social Lab Field Guide.

System thinking fundamentals include activities such as:

- ▶ Group systems mapping activities to explore assumptions and patterns of a system
- ▶ Asking what underlying patterns and structures we notice might be contributing to a problem or outcome?
- ▶ Asking what unintended consequences might emerge from a new intervention introduced in a system?
- ▶ Methodically asking "why" a lot, to uncover deep underlying assumptions that are taken for granted in systems

## WHAT TYPICALLY EMERGES FROM OUR LABS

Every one of our labs is unique and has different methods, and outcomes depending on needs. Generally though there are a few key deliverables that emerge:

**PORTFOLIO OF PROTOTYPES:** Well tested prototypes are low cost, low risk proofs of concepts that show promise to be further developed into potential pilots. Our longer social innovation approaches lead to a portfolio of prototypes co-created with community that have strong promise for implementation. With prototyping it is understood that not all prototypes will make it into pilots. However this saves time and resources as often in traditional strategy and program design pilots, pilots are implemented that too often don't meet the needs of stakeholders.

**LEARNING REPORTS:** We integrate developmental evaluation into all our labs and have been mentored and worked closely with leading developmental evaluation expert Mark Cabaj on all of our multi year labs. These reports typically illustrate learning about the nature of a challenge, learning from a lab process, learning about impact from prototyping and testing prototypes and implications for pilots.

**RICH STAKEHOLDER LEARNING:** What is also of high value that emerges from our labs is deeper understanding by lab participants who are involved in a system. This increases awareness about the complexity of an issue and shows what actions are possible for making progress. Often in longer labs the learning from the journey is also the goal and has tangible positive ripple effects in a system after a lab closes.



## RECENT PROJECTS

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### PROJECT: The Future of Home: Inclusive Housing Solutions Lab

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The Future of Home Lab is a multi year social innovation lab convened by the Skills Society Action Lab in partnership with Civida, Homeward Trust, and Inclusion Alberta and funded by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The Future of Home Lab generated new and creative housing and support models that are accessible, affordable, and enable the social inclusion of people with developmental disabilities.

[skillsociety.ca/projects/future-of-home-inclusive-housing-solutions-lab](https://skillsociety.ca/projects/future-of-home-inclusive-housing-solutions-lab)

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### PROJECT: The Edmonton Shift Lab 1.0 and 2.0

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The Edmonton Shift Lab was a 5 year social innovation lab convened by the Skills Society Action Lab and the Edmonton Community Foundation to address racism in Edmonton. The lab centered Indigenous knowledge through the whole process and generated promising initiatives and projects that continue to this day.

[www.edmontonshiftlab.ca/](http://www.edmontonshiftlab.ca/)

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### PROJECT: Design by Doing 1.0 and 2.0

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Design by Doing 1.0 and 2.0 were two different iterations of multi month social innovation labs. Design by Doing 2.0 was a collaboration between Skills Society Action Lab, Multicultural Health Brokers, EndPoverty Edmonton, City of Edmonton, and the Bhutanese Community in Edmonton. The lab process was culturally adapted and co-created with the Bhutanese Community to reflect their problem solving and communication approaches. Design By Doing 2.0 focused on prototypes that remove barriers to employment.

[issuu.com/edmontonshiftlab/docs/skills-society-final-bhutanese-report](https://issuu.com/edmontonshiftlab/docs/skills-society-final-bhutanese-report)

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### PROJECT: Curbside Accessible Parking Lab

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Contracted by the City of Edmonton, the Curbside Accessible Parking Lab utilized ethnography, service journey mapping, and design and systems thinking to explore barriers and options for curbside accessible parking as new automated systems of the city were coming into effect.

[issuu.com/edmontonshiftlab/docs/parking-report-final-jan6\\_1\\_2](https://issuu.com/edmontonshiftlab/docs/parking-report-final-jan6_1_2)

## PRINCIPAL CONSULTANTS

**BEN WEINLICK** is the Executive Director of Skills Society and was instrumental in developing the Action Lab. Ben has been deeply involved in systems change work through stewarding think tanks and social innovation for the last 12 years. He is the founder of a social innovation consultancy network called **THINK JAR COLLECTIVE**, and co-founder of a tangible social innovation called MyCompass Planning ([www.mycompassplanning.com/](http://www.mycompassplanning.com/)) that is scaling across Canada.

**PAIGE REEVES** is the Senior Leader of Research and Social Innovation at Skills Society and a PhD Candidate at the University of Alberta. In her role as Senior Leader she develops training, leads social innovation labs, and facilitates organizational research and development using human centred design approaches. Paige has stewarded numerous social innovation projects out of Action Lab. She has taken ethnographic design research training from InWithForward, an internationally known social design organization, as well as the evaluation for transformative change training from Michael Quinn Patton and Mark Cabaj, leading developmental evaluation experts. A leader and changemaker in the disability space for over a decade, Paige's doctoral research utilizes critical and participatory approaches to understand the conditions that support belonging in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities.

**REBECCA RUBULIAK** is the Senior Leader of Research and Social Innovation at Skills Society. In this role she develops training, leads social innovation labs, and facilitates organizational research and development using human centred design thinking and processes. Rebecca completed her Master's degree at the University of Alberta. Utilizing qualitative and participatory methods, her work explored the experiences of inclusion and belonging of children with disabilities. Rebecca has experience working on a variety of projects in all stages of research with quantitative, qualitative and community-based methodologies. Rebecca has worked as a coordinator, facilitator, and process designer for the Action Lab and has taken the evaluation for transformative change training from Michael Quinn Patton and Mark Cabaj, leading developmental evaluation experts.

### CONSULTANT TEAM MEMBERS

**MATT ASHDOWN**, Senior Manager of Community Supports

We also often tap into a rich community of systemic design practitioners we have mentored and worked alongside over the years. These team members are often hired as contractors for specific labs we steward and help with coaching lab teams through our lab processes.



*Diverse perspectives  
make for  
creative  
ideas!*

## CONTACT

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