From Mission to Purpose:

Transforming Canadian Social Enterprises Through Human-Centered Governance



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FOREWORD

This case study examines the creation, development, and implementation of social purpose at MCIS Language Solutions, a Canadian non-profit social enterprise, from 2021 to 2024. Drawing upon established theories of social impact, enterprise development, and social value creation, alongside a decade of inclusive practice evidence, our analysis reveals two critical success factors in the social purpose implementation.

First, customized, organic growth strategies demonstrated superior outcomes compared to the top-down approaches. Second, the adoption of robust governance standards, particularly the ISO 37000 Purpose-based Governance Standard, proved instrumental in strengthening organizational frameworks.

Furthermore, this case study highlights the significance of cultural alignment in virtual and hybrid work environments. Social enterprises and non-profits that successfully articulated and integrated clear purpose statements within their governance models exhibited enhanced organizational resilience throughout the post-pandemic recovery period.





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The 2022 IZA Institute of Labour Economics, analyzing European Working Condition Survey data, uncovered a surprising truth about job satisfaction. More than pay raises or promotions, three key factors drive meaningful work: the freedom to make decisions (autonomy), the ability to use and develop skills (competence), and strong workplace connections (relatedness). These elements make people 4.6 times more satisfied with their jobs than traditional benefits. When people find their work meaningful, they stay in their jobs longer, take fewer sick days, and learn more effectively. [1]



At MCIS Language Solutions, we experienced first hand how meaningful work transforms organizations. We recognized the need for a structured, measurable approach to sustain and scale these benefits.

This paper shares our journey of creating a more purposeful workplace through mobilization of our social purpose statement. Along the way, we discovered two critical enabling factors - innovative hiring practices and responsive governance structures - that helped us deeply embed social purpose throughout our organization.

Our experience offers valuable insights for other organizations seeking to align their operations with social impact.

Canadian Non-Profit Sector

The Canadian nonprofit sector, defined by organizations operating "exclusively for social welfare and civic improvement, without profit motives," represents a complex ecosystem where organizations must balance social impact objectives with operational sustainability. These organizations can qualify for tax-exempt status by meeting regulatory requirements, they struggle to maintain financial sustainability while fulfilling their core social missions. [2]

Based on Imagine Canada's 2023 analysis, non-profit organizations drive significant economic impact, generating over $192 billion annually—approximately 8.3% of Canada's GDP. The sector is a major employer, with 2.4 million Canadians (10% of the workforce) employed in non-profit roles, notably with women comprising 77% of the workforce. [3] However, despite this economic influence, the sector's dependence on government funds and donor preferences limits how freely organizations can operate, what they can achieve and reflect on their value chain.

Today's social economy roots trace back to 1400s Italian universities, especially in Milan and Naples. These ideas merged with 1700s cooperative ideals to create a people-first business vision. Foundational principles emphasized democratic participation, mutual benefit, collective action and equitable profit distribution. In 2004, Canada's Speech from the Throne elevated the "social economy" to federal priority status, defining it as "[encompassing] activities built on democratic values… distinct from the public sector and the commercial economy… redirecting their surpluses in pursuit of social and environmental purpose." [4] While federal policy priorities have evolved since 2004, the social economy's foundational principles of democratic governance have endured and strengthened, with "reciprocity" and "multi-stakeholder approach" central to modern practices and purpose-driven enterprises.[5]



Social Economy

Contemporary Canadian social economy organizations pursue dual economic and social objectives based on reciprocal benefits. Quebec's Chantier de l'économie sociale articulates three values: solidarity, autonomy, and citizenship.

These are operationalized through five principles: prioritizing community service over profit, maintaining independence from state/ funder control, implementing democratic governance, emphasizing human over financial capital, and ensuring equitable distribution. [6] Social purpose organizations emphasize multi-stakeholder input and governance, pursuing explicit social objectives through reciprocity, "human bonding or solidarity… the means by which labour, citizens, or consumers could exercise control over capital." [7]

This framework highlights key differences between for-profit, non-profit/public institutions, and social purpose organizations by examining their mission, resource management, and value creation:

	FOR-PROFITS	PUBLIC/ NON-PROFITS	**SOCIAL (ECONOMY) PURPOSE**
PURPOSE	Maximizing ROI for commercial gain	Redistribution of wealth by the state to maximize public good	**Maximizing mutual and collective benefit**
Who CONTROLS capital/ labour	Consumers/capital control over labour	Citizens	**Social** (labour/ citizens/ stakeholders, consumers) **over capital**
VALUE EXCHANGE ASSUMPTIONS	EFFICIENCY (commercial utility for consumer)	EQUALITY	**RECIPROCITY/ SOLIDARITY**



The Evolution of MCIS Language Solutions' Social Purpose (Implementation)

The period from 2010-2024 exemplified the sector-wide transformation, in parallel with the organization progressing from a traditional government-funded non-profit to a sustainable social enterprise. While the implementation of a fee-for-service model drove substantial revenue growth and operational independence, the transformation also precipitated an organizational identity crisis.

The misalignment between our "true identity" and the way the organization was perceived revealed the need for a comprehensive reassessment. By examining our purpose we examined our identity - a journey that helped us discover our unique value and describe our growth. Our experience may offer some key lessons for organizations and businesses embarking on a similar journey.

a. Social Purpose Discovery Phase

Our understanding of the Purpose Economy concept emerged in 2013 through Aaron Hurst's work at the Imperative, marking a shift from the Information Economy to a purpose-driven model. [8] Hurst reimagined the economy where purpose drives work and lives, moving beyond producing things and information. He outlined three types of purpose-driven organizations: those guided by strong values, focused on excellent work, and measuring their impact on all stakeholders. [9] Although Hurst's Purpose Workforce Index platform ended in 2022, some of its foundational work guided the development of a number of businesses and organizations. [10] From 2017 to 2019, interest in purpose organizations grew rapidly across North America, as more companies and researchers explored the strategic use of purpose in business, governance, and value chains. [11] In response to post-pandemic challenges, the same period also saw increased re-evaluation of social purpose business having a pivotal role in revitalizing society and economy. [12]



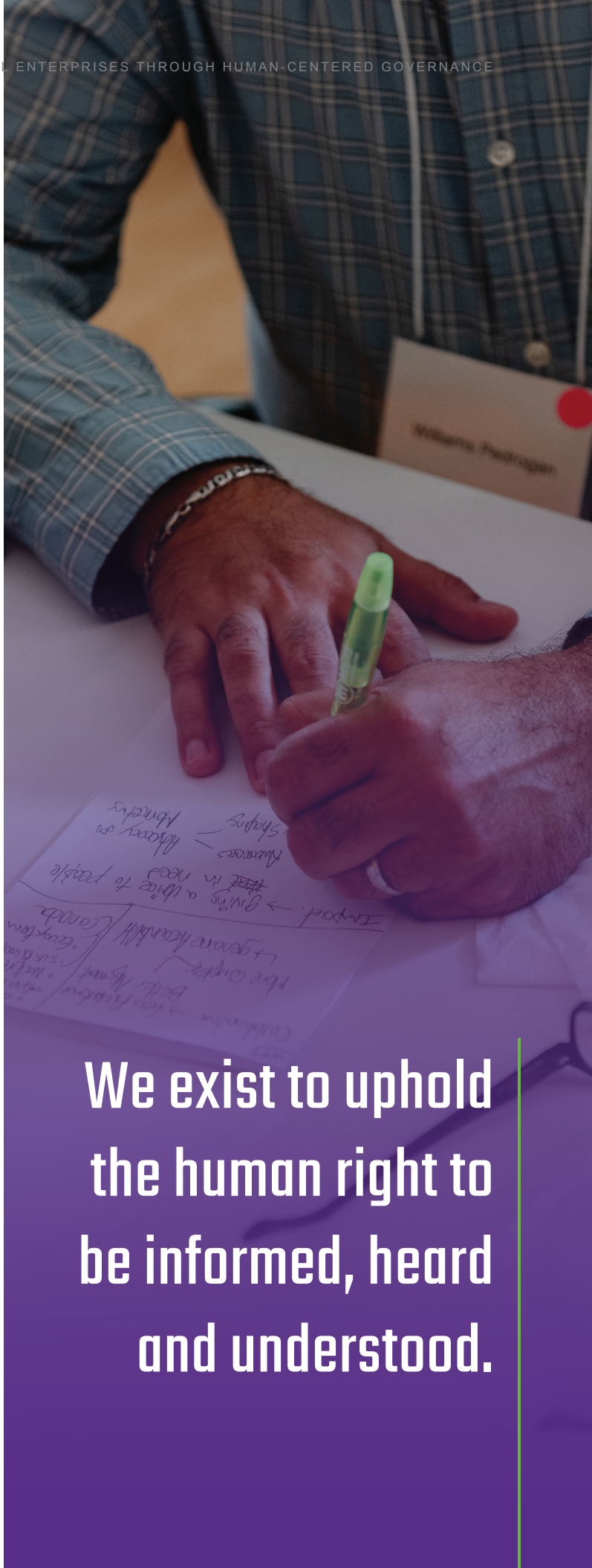
In Canada, the Social Purpose Institute (SPI) of the United Way British Columbia, in collaboration with the Canadian Social Economy Project, initiated a two-year program to guide companies through social purpose discovery and implementation. This variant of social economy, called the “purpose economy,” was conceptualized as “an economy powered by the pursuit of long-term well-being for all… systems fostering an equitable, flourishing, and resilient future… where growth is a positive force in society.”[13]

We joined this program from 2020 to 2022, and were thoroughly assisted with conducting a comprehensive two-year organizational transformation journey while adapting to pandemic conditions. Through this process, we gained crucial insights into evolving industry dynamics, particularly how our stakeholder relationships have been transforming in parallel to adaptation to first hybrid, and then virtual work.

The purpose assessment process revealed three challenges reshaping our organization’s future: increasing involuntary migration, growing social instability, and the rising threat of misinformation. We validated these findings through rigorous research, including surveys of 120 participants and 11 hours of in-depth stakeholder interviews across our ecosystem—from staff and Board members to language professionals, funders, and service users.

This consultation also identified potential operational impacts while capturing diverse perspectives on future industry trajectories. Resulting analysis sharpened our understanding of organizational identity and provided a robust framework for articulating our social purpose statement : “We exist to uphold the human right to be informed, heard and understood”

While the shift to virtual environments disrupted our habitual communication practices, it accelerated stakeholder engagement and trust-building. During physical isolation, we re-examined our core values while hosting structured conversations and wellness sessions addressing remote work mental health challenges. These dialogues strengthened our community bonds and reshaped our understanding of organizational purpose in a virtual context.



We exist to uphold the human right to be informed, heard and understood.

b. Social Purpose Mobilization Phase

As a non-profit social enterprise, we already knew that strong governance is essential to our success. The governance for us not only provides a framework for accountability but defines our relationships with key stakeholders ensuring we are rising beyond the minimum of regulatory, audit, and reporting requirements. To mobilize the purpose in governance we opted to start with an integrative approach across the workplace culture, human capital development, organizational structures, operational policies, and processes first.
This section examines how specific social purpose mobilization strategies were implemented between 2022-2025 to strengthen these elements and create a space for governance transformation.

I. Purpose Culture Scan

To understand the nuances of our organizational culture, we developed a comprehensive assessment framework that integrated the Hofstede Culture Scan Survey methodology with custom social purpose metrics. Based on Hofstede's six dimensions - which measure parameters like flexibility, team orientation, and work-life balance - we added targeted questions about social purpose integration and core values alignment. This enhanced methodology enabled us to create detailed cultural maps comparing our current state against future aspirations, providing actionable insights for cultural development.

The assessment findings highlighted our organization's cultural strength: a balanced integration of human-centered values with operational excellence. The survey also confirmed that our culture is prioritizing inclusivity and employee wellbeing while maintaining professional standards and goal achievement. The evaluation confirmed alignment between our core values, social purpose, and daily operations, but revealed significant momentum toward cultivating additional spaces for innovation and safe experimentation.

Employee feedback identified three priorities for improvement: strengthening internal communication to amplify employee voices, increasing transparency and information sharing, and expanding employee decision-making autonomy.

To drive these initiatives, three departments emerged as champions of integration - Human Resources, Social Purpose and Governance, and IT. IT was identified in particular as an often neglected instrument of bridging human and technology capital development.

To support organizational growth, we've institutionalized an annual MCIS Culture Scan adding categories such as autonomy, transparency, and innovation. This data-driven approach enables continuous monitoring of implementation effectiveness while ensuring our culture evolves with our social purpose. The annual assessment cycle will create a feedback loop for evaluating progress and adapting our initiatives to meet emerging stakeholder needs and operational challenges.



II. Social Purpose Implementers and Change Makers

Recognizing that each organization needs a unique approach to cultural change, we started with our frontline teams and worked our way in. From 2022-25, we focused on turning our frontline staff into organizational influencers - Social Purpose Implementers and Change Champions.

The Social Purpose Implementers Group met biweekly to identify and execute rapid organizational culture enhancements. Through structured dialogue exploring personal and professional purpose, the group developed ideas and initiatives in three areas: corporate volunteering programs, recognition programs, and process improvements to better integrate organizational values into service delivery.

The Change Champions program identified and empowered emergent leaders across departments. We selected eight (8) high-potential employees with strong interpersonal skills and commitment to our social purpose. These Champions underwent intensive training in Appreciative Inquiry techniques, including storytelling, strength-based interviewing, and collaborative visioning. The training equipped them to facilitate meaningful dialogue about organizational purpose and model inclusive leadership practices. Early results showed impact: Champions' teams reported 40% higher engagement scores and initiated twice as many cross-functional collaboration projects compared to other departments.

By establishing the network of internal advocates, we created sustainable channels for cascading cultural change and reinforcing purpose-driven behaviors. The Champions continue to bridge senior leadership vision with frontline implementation while providing feedback to refine our transformation efforts.

Additional tools added in response to the Culture Scan need were:

1. Regular all-staff gatherings that evolved into vibrant forums for authentic connection. Monthly virtual meetups saw attendance rise from 45% to 85% over six months. Employees suggested topic-focused discussions on critical workplace themes: psychological safety and vulnerability, mindfulness for remote teams, and advancing social justice through language access.



2. The collaborative development of two foundational resources transforming our organizational dialogue and training: The Psychological Safety Framework and The Words Create Worlds Glossary. The Framework established guidelines for creating psychologically safe spaces, including protocols for constructive feedback, pathways for raising concerns without fear of retribution, and best practices for inclusive discussions and decision-making. The Glossary became a living document defining key concepts around language justice and accessibility, providing examples of inclusive vs. exclusionary language and

alternatives to problematic terms. Feedback showed 85% of participants feel more confident expressing innovative ideas and constructive criticism since their implementation. The framework and glossary have become essential tools for maintaining consistent, inclusive communication across our virtual workplace.

3. Appreciative Inquiry-Based Communication Training helped us to develop effective narratives for change management and social purpose implementation as we opted for a conversational methodology over diagnostic approaches. [14] A comprehensive training was delivered across all levels including the “Me-We-Us” framework emphasizing Change Champions. Participants explored individual motivations (“Me”), shared understanding through paired exchanges (“We”), and synthesized insights into team-level action plans (“Us”), yielding measurable improvements in cross-functional collaboration, with 70% of participants reporting stronger alignment between personal values and organizational mission.

4. The October 2024 first Purpose Governance Retreat was pivotal for our social purpose journey, bringing together 40 key stakeholders including frontline staff, Board members, and Committee representatives. Over one day, participants learned about shared and purpose governance and engaged in Appreciative Inquiry exercises to bridge traditional hierarchies and foster more open dialogue about our shared purpose. This approach yielded two outcomes: development of monthly “Social Purpose Governance” drop-in sessions for regular exchanges between Board members and staff, structured mentoring opportunities, and the expansion of the Board Management System to include Board education development opportunities. Post-retreat surveys revealed that 92% of participants felt the experience strengthened cross-organizational relationships and governance understanding, and provided actionable steps for advancing our social purpose objectives.



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c. MCIS, Employee Social Purpose Journey Mapping

As part of social purpose transformation, we also evaluated the employee journey throughout the employment lifecycle. We prioritized enhancing our recruitment processes to align with our social purpose objectives, addressing: “How can we attract top industry talent while ensuring social purpose alignment?” We integrated purpose-driven elements across all recruitment stages—from crafting job ads that articulate our organizational raison d’être and highlight service beneficiaries to guiding candidates through relevant media content before their initial engagement. We redesigned pre-screening and interview protocols to incorporate social purpose elements that catalyze meaningful dialogue about organizational values and social mission. These modifications yielded significant results in 2022-2023, demonstrated by a 71% increase in candidates showing strong familiarity with language access concepts, linguistic rights, and MCIS’ social purpose, mission, vision, and values during initial interactions.

In addition, the onboarding process was restructured to integrate social purpose from the outset, involving direct engagement with the Social Purpose Governance team and Executive Director. This approach generated immediate positive outcomes, with management reporting enhanced quality of new hires, strengthened employee engagement metrics, improved work product quality, reduced absenteeism, and increased internal career advancement interest.

While we’ve progressed in integrating social purpose into our human capital and operational processes, significant work remains. We’re focusing on embedding social purpose principles into core management policies and practices. Specifically, we’re interested in developing transparent career progression frameworks that align advancement opportunities with social impact objectives, creating structured learning pathways that strengthen technical capabilities and purpose-driven leadership skills, implementing regular social purpose impact assessments in performance evaluations, and establishing mentorship programs that pair emerging leaders with experienced social purpose practitioners.



These initiatives reflect our understanding that organizational transformation requires continuous reinforcement through formal systems and processes. By weaving social purpose into our management approach, we create lasting institutional change rather than temporary programmatic success.

d. Social Purpose Governance

The historical landscape of Canadian non-profit governance reflects systemic inequalities. For decades, governance authority was concentrated among privileged elites, excluding qualified individuals from Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. This exclusionary framework perpetuated discrimination through mechanisms linked to Canada's colonial legacy. While we value our current Board and Committee relationships, we recognize that traditional governance models have failed to represent our diverse stakeholders and no longer align with contemporary inclusive leadership standards.

The introduction of ISO 37000 in 2022 established a voluntary framework for Purpose Governance, creating a pathway to a structured approach to align our purpose and business objectives with stakeholder expectations through transparent, ethical and responsible practices. Purpose governance integrates organizational purpose, values, and culture into decision-making processes, resulting in enhanced business outcomes, strengthened reputation and trust through ethical value chains, improved accountability and transparency, superior risk management, and more robust environmental stewardship.[15]

To facilitate this transformation, our Board established a standing Social Purpose Governance Committee to oversee policy development and ISO 37000 Standard implementation. Through partnerships with organizations like the Ontario Non-Profit Network Governance Lab, we gained insights into how to modernize our governance approach and identify relevant training resources. The success of this initiative required a comprehensive internal movement across three dimensions - developing an inclusive organizational culture that celebrates diversity, establishing clear trust frameworks and accountability measures, and empowering marginalized voices in decision-making. After extensive research and stakeholder consultation, we developed policy frameworks centered on three pillars: organizational accountability, long-term sustainability, and equitable stakeholder engagement. We are currently developing the main ISO Policy expecting to complete this work by the end of 2025.



Just to mention that these frameworks also build upon our 35-year legacy of advancing language justice while acknowledging contemporary challenges. Our evolution from a traditional language service provider to a purpose-driven social enterprise has transformed our question of "Is language justice achievable?" to "How can our governance, culture and advocacy advance language justice?" To answer this, we're considering to add other strength-based governance practices suggested by the Standard e.g. create a Language Justice Advisory Council that will include service beneficiaries, community advocates, and language professionals, develop metrics to measure the inclusion of beneficiary perspectives in decision-making, and build capacity among Board members and senior leadership to engage with and respond to community input.

e. Social Purpose Metrics

Measuring social purpose and impact remains a challenge for any purpose-driven organizations. We address this through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ISO 37000 frameworks, which, we believe, provide a comprehensive measuring approach for sustainability. The SDGs offer a global blueprint through 17 targets addressing urgent challenges from poverty to climate change, while ISO 37000 translates these aspirations into actionable governance practices. This dual framework enables alignment with international sustainability standards and implementation of mechanisms for ethical operations, stakeholder engagement, and impact measurement. Most importantly, it facilitates collaboration across sectors - connecting government policy, business innovation, and civil society advocacy for sustainable development. The intersectionality of language rights and justice makes us well suited to thrive in this space.

Our organizational focus is primarily on three SDGs: Good Health and Well-Being (3), Reduced Inequalities (10), and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (16). However, we recognize that language meaningfully impacts multiple SDG objectives. For example, we advance SDGs 1 and 10 through implementation of fair compensation policies, advancement of inclusive hiring practices, maintenance of accessible training programs for underrepresented and marginalized populations (including refugees, asylum seekers, and newcomers), support of community language advocacy projects, and comprehensive social impact assessment of the MCIS Social Benefit Fund, which provides free language services to individuals and organizations lacking language funding resources. [16] We systematically monitor these initiatives through quantitative data collection, issuing quarterly Board reports and annual public accountability statements. In addition, we are also aligned with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), combined with the ISO 37000's multi- stakeholder engagement principle, promotes diversity on our Board and committees, and fostering mentorship and peer-to-peer programs. Finally, our commitment to continuous innovation and organizational resilience also supports SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) through multiple channels - from innovation-enabling governance practices, strategic partnership with universities and public technology working groups working on digital inclusion to responsible technology implementation initiatives (e.g. integrating AI language tools with human oversight).

These efforts, strengthened by our UN Global Compact membership and transparent annual impact reporting, position us as a competitive market leader and a catalyst for sustainable development within the language industry.





Conclusion:

The DIfficult Balancing Act - Purpose and Progress

Organizational transformation toward social purpose reveals predictable challenges and emergent complexities. Our journey has shown that implementing purpose-driven governance frameworks and cultural initiatives yields measurable short-term gains in employee engagement and stakeholder trust, but the long-term impacts on community wellbeing and social justice are harder to quantify.

Critical questions persist about how purpose-driven leadership shapes sustainable social change: How do we measure improved quality of life for vulnerable populations beyond basic service metrics? What governance structures support operational excellence and community empowerment? How can we ensure technological advances enhance human dignity and connection?

Despite open questions, our experience suggests organizations that integrate social purpose into their DNA - through robust governance, inclusive culture, and meaningful stakeholder engagement - are better positioned to navigate future challenges while advancing their social mission. The key lies in maintaining dynamic tension between aspiration and pragmatism, and between pursuing transformative change while ensuring operational sustainability.

> The key here is viewing social impact not as a constraint on growth, but as a catalyst for innovation and sustainable competitive advantage.

The reality of social purpose organizations is that they must balance their values with evolving market demands. Our experience shows that when purpose and operational excellence are integrated, they become mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities. The key here is viewing social impact not as a constraint on growth, but as a catalyst for innovation and sustainable competitive advantage.



This journey also taught us that an embraced and implemented organizational purpose creates powerful decision-making that transcends traditional business metrics. It might enable organizations to pursue bold social missions while building resilient, sustainable enterprises.

As the language justice landscape evolves with emerging technologies and changing demographic needs, our integrated approach positions us to shape a more equitable and inclusive future.



Finally, the transformation of social purpose organizations like ours indicates a broader shift in defining organizational success - one that measures prosperity not just in financial terms, but in our capacity to create lasting positive change in the communities we serve.

This in itself, we feel, is the most important lesson for organizations navigating social impact and enterprise sustainability in the years ahead.



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Eliana Trinaistic

Director of Social Purpose, Impact and Culture, MCIS Language Solutions

Drawing upon 25 years of executive leadership experience in social purpose and impact organizations, Eliana has developed extensive expertise in stakeholder engagement and organizational development. Through strategic roles in social innovation, equitable service design, and digital rights preservation, she cultivated deep insights into the ethical and operational requirements of modern public and social services. This work has demonstrated that organizational purpose must be systematically developed and sustained through robust governance frameworks. Her leadership has advanced numerous initiatives addressing language and information access and censorship.

Her current research focus is on the platform economy, workplace purpose/ purpose economy, and global measurement frameworks (BCorp, SDGs, IDGs). Throughout her work, Eliana maintains an unwavering commitment to fostering transformative hope empowering individuals and communities. (elianatrinaistic.com)



Tania Tossuti

HR Business Partner, MCIS Language Solutions

Tania leverages her background in personal wellness to drive strategic human capital initiatives. Since joining the organization, she has played an instrumental role in developing comprehensive employee well-being programs, advancing DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) initiatives, and implementing supportive leadership frameworks. In addition, Tania provided strategic leadership support, specializing in talent management, and organizational development initiatives. Her expertise focuses on aligning human resource strategies with organizational objectives to drive sustainable growth and enhance operational effectiveness. A dedicated professional development advocate, and a pioneer of cultivating purpose-driven workplace cultures Tania continuously pursues advanced training and education to strengthen her organizational impact and implement evidence-based strategies. She regularly contributes to industry discussions on emerging workplace trends, particularly focusing on mental health support and inclusive leadership practices. Her commitment to creating psychologically safe work environments has resulted in measurable improvements in team performance and satisfaction metrics.

MCIS Language Solutions







Is a Toronto-based non-profit that has evolved into a model social enterprise and has been relentlessly pursuing its goal to remove language barriers for over 35 years. With over 70 full time staff and engaging a roster of over 5,000 interpreters, translators, voice artists, transcriptionists, training facilitators, and other language professionals, MCIS provides a full suite of language solutions: from language interpretation, translation and transcription to localization, training and training development for government, legal, police services and healthcare organizations in 300+ languages. Through the Social Benefit Fund, MCIS reinvests a portion of its annual net income to provide free essential language services for vulnerable populations and create pathways into the profession through training subsidies for aspiring language professionals. This commitment to social impact, combined with our proven operational excellence and strong community ties, has established MCIS as an industry leader demonstrating how purpose-driven enterprises can achieve both market success and meaningful social change.

MCIS purpose. mission and vision transcends mere language connection—it's about fostering genuine human understanding across cultures. Through authentic, transparent bridges, MCIS dissolves linguistic barriers worldwide, creating pathways to shared prosperity while empowering communities to fully participate in global dialogue.

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