Jacob: Hello everyone, welcome to another episode of The Future Of Work podcast. My guest today is Abe Greenspoon, and he is the Program Lead for Canada's free agents, which is part of the Canadian public service. Abe, thank you for joining me.

Abe: Yeah, thanks for having me, Jacob.

Jacob: So I always get requests from podcast listeners, and they always say, "You know, you talk to a lot of business leaders inside of companies, it will be really cool if you can talk to people who are more on the government side, the public service side, who are actually trying to drive change on a non-corporate level." so I'm glad to talk to you about some of the cool programs that you're doing. Why don't we start off with a little bit of background information about you, and maybe just high level, what is the Canadian public service, and what is the free agents program?

Abe: Sure, absolutely. So a little bit about myself, I've been in the public service of Canada for about 10 years. I'll admit, I was kind of a bit of a reluctant bureaucrat, I sort of fell into the public service, I think, in a way. I joined in 2009, and I was kind of recruited through a post secondary program.

Abe: I was working, actually, at the time in the private sector for Citigroup, a big American bank, and they had a Canadian office in London, Ontario, and I was working there. And then 2009, I think everybody knows there was a bit of a difficult time for the banks, for the banking industry, and so that was, definitely, affecting us in Canada too.

Abe: So, honestly, I was just kind of thinking about what I was going to do. I don't think my career was in jeopardy, but I sort of started to think about, "Well, should I pursue different career options?" And kind of started looking around, and heard about this recruitment program in the public service, and decided it might be an interesting jump, and so I applied, and here I am kind of 10 years later.

Abe: I didn't really know what I was getting myself into, I didn't actually know too much about public service work. I did political science in my undergraduate and graduate degrees in Canada but, yeah, I didn't really know what I was getting myself into, and here I am 10 years later.

Abe: I've worked in a bunch of different jobs in the public service, I worked in kind of program roles, and some policy roles, and engagement roles, communications roles, and just kind of moved around. And, I guess, now about four years ago, I heard about this idea that was being pitched in one of the departments called 'free agents', and kind of started to look into what they were doing, and found out about the idea, and was really interested in being a free agent.

Abe: I'll talk a little bit, I'm sure, about what the free agent's all about and how it works. But, generally, really just the idea for the program, at kind of a fairly high level, was greater mobility and autonomy for public servants.

Abe: The idea was inspired by a Deloitte report. Deloitte had a thing called 'gov lab' in Washington, D.C. where they were kind of studying the public service, and trying to get

a sense of how the government might reorganize itself to respond to some of the problems of the future.

Abe: This was actually back in 2012 when they were doing this study, and they released the report, and it looked really interesting to us, the concept was 'gov cloud'. And they had this idea of cloud based workforce kind of built off the idea of the IT cloud computing, but thinking if you could apply that to human resources, or sort of the people in your organization.

Abe: Conceptually, the idea would be that you'd have people residing in the cloud, as a concept, and then they'd be available to do project based work, move around the organization, solve problems, return to the cloud when they weren't needed anymore, and then just continue on to different projects.

Abe: So we were kind of inspired by that idea, and started to talk about how we might apply that, or implement that idea in the government of Canada, and whether it would work for us. And so we kind of caught our inspiration from that concept, and then started to kind of make it our own.

Abe: And over the past three or four years, we've started to really turn it into something that works for the kind of context that we're interested in thinking about; the future of work, and talent management. And I think a lot of the topics that you talk about on your show, and how to get into some of that, as you want.

Jacob: Yes, yes. So why don't we jump a little bit further into what the program actually is, how does it work. So anything more that you can share about that, and then we can go a little bit deeper on some of the other things as well.

Abe: Sure, that's great. So, basically again, the concept being this idea of a cloud is similar to maybe the idea of a pool, or a group of public servants who kind of exist in the same space, and are available for hire within the public service.

Abe: So the idea, for us, was to create this pool, create this cloud of talent in the public service that would be available for managers to hire anywhere in the public service. Without getting too much into the technical details of our human resources system, basically we create positions where already existing public servants, so people who are already permanent public servants, move from wherever they are today doing their job, into these positions and then they're made available, basically, for any manager anywhere in the public service to hire them to do any project that they want them to do.

Abe: We do kind of an application process and, I'm sure, that people might be interested in the application process that we use. We've tried to design something that's a little bit different, a little bit more geared towards the sorts of people that we're looking for.

Abe: Generally, we're interested in kind of problem solving skills, and we sort of refer to them as 'attributes'. Things creativity, and curiosity, and empathy, resilience, action orientation; we have a set of 14 attributes that we're interested in hiring for.

Abe: And then, frankly at that point, beyond that we're not really concerned about things the domains of work, or skills, or specific skill sets, or technical skills; we're just interested in the type of person kind of being a problem solver, generally, with his problem solving attributes.

Abe: And so what we do is we advertise for these opportunities, for these positions, within the public service, and people that are interested apply. They go through our application process, and those who are successful, are offered these positions.

Abe: And then from those positions they're, essentially, able to choose whatever work they want to do. They have full autonomy over the decisions they make, where they go, how long they go there, and they kind of go out and just sort of sell themselves across the public service as resources for hire.

Abe: We're really interested in just the concept of autonomy, what happens when you give people within an organization full autonomy and control over the jobs that they choose, and what benefits might you see from that? How you might see greater employee satisfaction, better decision making in their career? So let people be kind of the authors of their career, kind of choose the places that they want to go, and then what benefits might you see from that?

Abe: So just on an operational kind of level, we have set up a program that is structured to allow that sort of mobility, that autonomy, those sorts of decisions to get made. We've created an executive group that sort of supports and sponsors these positions, takes the risk on these positions, and then allows these people to go out and find projects anywhere they want to.

Abe: We've created what we call 'Talent Manager' positions within the organizations, and those people are there to sort of provide career support, administrative support to sort of make sure that the free agents are able to find opportunities anywhere they're interested, and to sort of be there as a sounding board to support them.

Abe: We've also kind of started to grow the program, we started out just in one department, one ministry in the public service. It started in Natural Resources Canada, it's grown across multiple departments now where these positions are held. We're in Transport Canada, and one of our central agencies, the Treasury Board Secretary, and we've hired now close to 90 people, so it's still quite a small project.

Abe: And we've still, I think, grown quite slowly, and I think that's kind of a measure of the way things happen in the public service; pretty measured and pretty ... Yeah, we sort of do things in a safe kind of way. But we've managed to, I think, disrupt a little bit some of the operations, some of the ideas about talent, about mobility, and about kind of the employee experience with inside the organizations.

Jacob: How does the program work? So let's say, for example, I'm in Canada, I work in transportation. So, what sort of a role would I have in transportation? I mean anything,

anyone from a knowledge worker to somebody who's actually out there driving a bus, driving a train, doing anything like that?

Abe: Yeah, I mean definitely, it's a possibility. You have to kind of limit it, I think, within the opportunities that you find in short term projects. That definitely deep knowledge areas, I think, in the public service, where it might not lend itself to this kind of work. I mean, if you need really technical expertise like airplane inspectors, for example, using the transportation idea, this might not be ideal for an airplane inspector, if that's really the thing that you want to do.

Abe: We might not want free agents to be the ones that are inspecting our airplanes, unless we can find some way to do that predictably and reliably. But I think we have expectations that people have deep knowledge, and deep expertise and commitment to that field, and they work in that field kind of as a career over your lifetime, so I think, we're of maybe Talking about maybe people ... I've referred to them as a bit of generalists. I like to think of them more as problem solvers, who can just work on projects that require that shorter term expertise.

Jacob: Okay. So in transportation, for example, would sort of a role could have somebody have in transportation?

Abe: Yeah, I mean, so in the public service, a lot of the roles tend to be policy advice, or they tend to be program management, or project management.

Jacob: Okay.

Abe: You see people in digital space, maybe working as coders, or working as maybe someone like the change management experts.

Jacob: Okay, that makes sense.

Abe: Yeah, I think a lot of the areas that, generally, problem solvers are interested in, is looking at future oriented work. So how is the work changing, and how can we influence change over time?

Jacob: Okay, so let's say I'm a program manager who works in transportation, how do I get from that to the free agent concept? Is there a ... First, how would I find out about it if I'm in transportation as a Program Manager? And let's say I find out about it, what do I do? How does that whole process work, how do you apply for it, do you interview for it? And once you become that free agent, what happens next? What does that actually look like?

Abe: For sure, yeah. And I love to talk about this stuff, I just hope your listener's eyes don't glaze over when I start getting into the details.

Jacob: No-

Abe: But-

Jacob: I think it's also applicable to organizations, as well, because a lot of-

Abe: Yeah.

Jacob: Companies are now starting to think about, "How do we create these types of marketplaces internally?"

Abe: Yeah.

Jacob: So if you're able to do this on the government side, I think a lot of people could take some lessons from that, and what they could do on the business side.

Abe: Yeah, definitely, well that's great. I mean, we kind of looked at it as all being kind of driven by autonomy, so that was kind of the starting point is to set people free, and let them, as I said, sort of be the authors of their career, and make those decisions themselves; so we tried to really set everything up with that kind of premise.

Abe: But practically what that means, is it means when a person is interested in becoming a free agent let's say, again, using your example. They're a Program Manager at transportation, they express their interest, we do advertisements; it's kind of a soft advertisement.

Abe: There's a formalized appointments process in the public service, and that usually happens when you do formally advertised processes through our system, and that's vetted in certain ways. And then there's kind of a, I would say, a bit more of an informal mobility element to the public service, to our organizations, in that people move in informal kind of ways.

Abe: They move laterally at level without getting a promotion. We have a pretty structured job classification system that determines pay for public servants, but you are able to move laterally, fairly easily, in the public service, in informal ways and formal ways.

Abe: So we advertise all across the public service as broadly as we can. Within our networks, looking for people in the areas we think they might be in, and that sort of changed over time. We try to advertise as broadly as we can even on social media, or internal. We have some internal social media platforms in the public service.

Abe: And then if they're interested, they, essentially, just apply. There's a written application process that we've tried to keep fairly lean and, again, we're really just looking for them to explain how they possess the attributes that we're interested in. So talk about why you would be a good fit as a free agent.

Abe: And we try to give examples of what it's to be a free agent. Some of the pressures that you'd see as a free agent, some of the constraints that you'll have, it's frequency of movement. And so you're changing jobs sometimes every six months to a year, and that can put a lot of pressure on people.

Abe: So we try to articulate really well what that look like, and then give them a sense of what we're interested in, and how they might be successful, and then to talk about that in their application; so not super complicated.

Abe: Then after they do the application, we do an in-person interview, usually just about 30 minutes. We ask six questions, some pretty basic stuff, but we're kind of trying to dig into the attributes to get them to talk a little bit about resilience, and their creativity, and empathy and, again, trying to get them to talk a little bit about the work they've done.

Abe: We try and ask them some interesting questions, set them off a little bit. And, anyway, it's just kind of a standard interview, I think, when it comes right down to it. And then, I think the most interesting part of our process is the group interviews that we do.

Abe: We've actually designed some group project type modules that we use for our group interview process. And that involves people coming either in person, or virtually on WebEx we use to bring people together and kind of solve problems, or work on puzzles. We've had them play games, we've had them do logic puzzles, we've had them do improv.

Abe: And, essentially, what we're doing is we're watching them. We bring them into a room, we have some assessors in the room, and we're looking for those attributes to be either present, or not, in the way that they do their work, in the way they approach group work, and the way they interact with other people to see if they possess those sorts of attributes.

Abe: And even just learning about that process has been really interesting about the way we do our assessments. It's been really fascinating to sort of learn from that, learn what works, and try and do that in a kind of a rigorous way. And I think a lot-

Jacob: Look at the improv that you have-

Abe: Yeah, yeah-

Jacob: Yeah.

Abe: Yeah, that's been a fun one. Without giving too much away, because I don't know who will listen to this. But we sort of have people kind of act out situations just to see ... And, again, it's funny because in all these situations, we don't really care what they end up doing at the end, it's more of the process of how they do it.

Abe: I don't want to give away too many secrets, but at the end of the day, when we're looking for someone to be creative, or we're looking for someone that has team orientation, we're not necessarily caring too much about the way that they act. It doesn't matter if you're an introvert or an extrovert, the process you go through to achieve kind of group success is really important, and that's sort of what we're watching for, so we have some interesting experiences with that process.

Abe: And then once you're successful, we also do reference checks; I should mention that too. Once you're successful, and you've been selected, we offer you that deployment, we call it, and it's just that lateral movement from wherever you are.

Abe: Let's say, again, in the Program Manager case of transportation, we would move you from that position, you're doing your work there, we're taking you, and we're putting you into a new position where you actually, again, don't have any concrete specific responsibilities; your job is to go out and look for those responsibilities, to look for those opportunities.

Abe: And so the first thing you do when you get accepted into the free agent program, is you look for your first assignment. And you go out and you start talking to managers about the things you want to do, you look at the proposals, we have managers submitting proposals to us all the time. The demand has been incredible for the programs, so there's always opportunities for the free agents.

Jacob: So quick question for you before you talk-

Abe: Sure.

Jacob: A little bit more about that. Okay, so first of all, sounds it's actually tough to become a free agent; it's not just something that anybody can do. I mean, going through these assessments, these questions, you gotta do improv stuff; I mean, it sounds a tough thing to get into.

Abe: Yeah. I mean, I think so. I mean, we're trying to take everybody seriously because I think the original intention of that was just to really make sure that we got people who were serious about this who really-

Jacob: Yeah.

Abe: Were committed to getting into this situation, that was risky. I mean, just take a step back and think about when we first started this thing, no one knew exactly what was going to happen, or where we were headed. We were asking people to take big risks on this program, we are asking people to commit to creating positions for people that do work that had nothing to do with their individual mandates.

Abe: So I think about an executive in an organization hiring a bunch of people, committing to pay them, but then agreeing to let them go and work wherever they want to; I mean, it's a big risk to take. I should mention, just on the technical side, when they find these projects, they go somewhere else to a different department. That department reimburses us for their salary, and they also pay us an additional fee to operate the program, and to run it.

Abe: But still, I mean, we're taking a big risk, these executives are taking a big risk to get these people, and pay them, and commit to protecting their salaries, and then letting them go other places. So we had to convince them that we were going to be rigorous about the

way that we selected these people, we had to be serious about the sorts of things we were hiring them for, and then we had to be able to demonstrate that those things are in demand, and are the things that people are actually looking for in the system to hire them, so that it was lower risk than it might otherwise be.

Abe: So it's kind of evolved over time, and we sort of use it because we actually want those attributes to be more present in the system. We started to work a little bit with some international organizations talking about, do we have enough courage in the government of Canada? Do we have enough empathy in the government of Canada?

Abe: What are the behaviors that we're seeing, and what do we want to see more of? And these sorts of problem solving attributes ... For the public service they're, in our view, really essential, and we need to see more of them. So we started to get more rigorous about the way that we assess for them, and the importance that they bring.

Jacob: From these interviews that you've been doing, and from the people that you've been speaking with as a part of the free agent program, what are you finding as far as what makes a good free agent, and what doesn't?

Jacob: And again, I think that this is also important because a lot of leaders, a lot of managers inside of organizations, they're constantly thinking about creating their own internal freelance marketplaces, they're thinking about even allowing virtual work, people or situations where you don't necessarily see your manager and see your leader all the time. I know it's not exactly the same as being a free agent, but what are some of the characteristics that you have found that make a good free agent, and what would not make a good free agent?

Abe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah, that's a great question. So part of me wants to say that anybody could be a free agent, and I could explain that a little bit of why I think that. But I know what we're limited by a little bit, I think, is you alluded to it earlier, and we talked about it a bit; it's just the type of work that might work well for someone who wants to be a free agent.

Abe: So, again, you might not be a good free agent if your expectation is to work in a very specific technical kind of field where you need deep expertise in something. That might mean that free agency isn't for you if that's your passion, and you want to stick with that type of work.

Abe: I do think this lends itself really well to someone who is kind of exploring their career a little bit, or still has some interest in kind of understanding opportunities that might be out there for them to grow, and rethink their career, and move around frequently to try out different things, who has a willingness to fail; I think that's also really important.

Abe: So comfort with knowing that you might not be successful in every opportunity, comfort with a steep learning curve, in some cases. And I think comfort with an ability to learn really quickly. Ability to learn is one of the attributes that we really focus in on, and we try and test that as best we can.

Abe: Because if you're constantly changing jobs, let's say, every six months or a year, you'd be really good at jumping into something, understanding the context, really quickly kind of picking up who are the players, what's the culture-

Jacob: How do you test that, by the way? Because actually before I spoke with you, I spoke with the Chief Talent Officer at Intel.

Abe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jacob: And she also mentioned this idea of being a perpetual learner, learning how to learn, learning agility very, very important topics. But how do you actually test for that? How do you know if somebody possesses that quality or not?

Abe: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question. There's a lot of things ... I won't profess to be an expert about it, and I've had some help designing our processes in that respect. But we've sort of played around with different options for the modules that we use for the actual assessment. The current one right now is a series of logic puzzles ... Kind of logic puzzles, kind of puzzles that sort of get a person to kind of think through how to solve the puzzles in a group setting.

Abe: And so we give them these puzzles to work together in a group, and we get them to talk out loud about the things that they're thinking about to try to solve the problems. And I think it's the process of problem solving and thinking things through, and trying to understand what this entails, and trying to understand what's being expected of you, and then talk about it, understand it; that's kind of what we're trying to get at for the ability to learn really quickly.

Abe: And so just the ability to pick up what we might be getting at, to pick up what we might be looking forward, to pick up how the process might work for one of these puzzles, I think is what we're looking for when we do this.

Abe: And what we do is we start with a fairly simple puzzle, and then we try to make them progressively harder to the point where it's actually nearly impossible to solve in some instances. But, again, we're sort of more interested in the process of learning, rather than the outcome of your ability to solve the problem or-

Jacob: Yeah.

Abe: To come to the solution. What-

Jacob: I'm kind of puzzled by the way, I'm really curious. Because you mentioned puzzles-

Abe: Yeah.

Jacob: And so I knew chess puzzles, for example. So when-

Abe: Yeah.

Jacob:	You say, "Puzzle." I'm immediately in my mind thinking like, "Oh, cool chess puzzles, I love chess puzzles." What kind of puzzles? Because we've all seen those ... they're like these hands on puzzles where there's these intertwined pieces of metal, and you got to try to take them apart and put them back together. There's so many different types of puzzles-
Abe:	Yeah.
Jacob:	Out there.
Abe:	Yeah.
Jacob:	Which ones are you referring to?
Abe:	Well so, initially, what we tried was Tangrams. I don't know if you're aware of Tangrams.
Jacob:	No, never heard of it.
Abe:	These are shaped puzzles and, basically, you take a square of paper, or you take a square of anything, you cut it into different shapes, and then using those shapes, you make a picture of something else.
Abe:	So there's a way to take a square, cut it into a bunch of triangles, squares, and maybe ... I don't know, whatever different shapes, and then putting those together in a different way outside the square; you created a rabbit.
Abe:	And what we might start with is a picture with parts of the lines differentiated for the different pieces. And, eventually, you gradually remove those lines, and show a new picture, and now you've got a house from those shapes. And you've got to build a house without seeing any of the lines and just seeing kind of the outline of the house.
Abe:	As so you've got to figure out how to take those shapes and put them together in front of you, in a way that turns it into a house, from a square into a house, or a rabbit, or whatever the shape is. And it gets progressively harder, so you start off with something easy, and you show them a few of the lines so they can see where the pieces go, and then you gradually remove those, and then they can't see them at all.
Abe:	It was kind of an interesting one, that didn't do that last time; last time we actually tried logic puzzles. So give the names of four students, and they play different instruments, and they're different ages, but then you don't say who's who. And you give them clues, and through the process of deduction or logical reasoning, they come up with which student was which age, and played which instrument.
Abe:	And they have to work together to try and use the logic, based on one, two, or three maybe clues, saying like, "Stephanie is seven, and Bob plays a guitar." And then from that, you have to kind of figure out who plays what instrument, and who's which age.

Anyway, kind of deductive, logical reasoning puzzles, again, that get kind of progressively harder over time.

Jacob: So basically you're torturing people, it what's going on.

Abe: It definitely feels that way, I can tell, for the people that are being interviewed.

Jacob: Yeah, no, I would imagine. Okay, so you go through this process, and ... Well first, how long does the whole process take from applying to be a free agent to actually becoming a free agent, going through the assessment, getting offered that formal position; how long does that take?

Abe: That tend to take around three months. That's been kind of our time from posting the opportunity, to giving the offer to the person.

Jacob: Okay. And when you post the opportunity, are you just saying, "Hey, we have a new free agent opportunity?" Or are you just constantly saying, "Hey, become a free agent?" And-

Abe: Yeah.

Jacob: Here's what a free agent is. Or is it a specific job description?

Abe: Uh-huh. Yeah, I mean, the free agent doesn't really have a job description. Again, it's just sort of like, "You're a free agent, you go out and kind of find your job description." And we're kind of just saying, "This is what it is to be a free agent, this is what we're offering. We're offering you autonomy and mobility, and so come join our program."

Abe: Once they've been accepted, it gets into the where we actually put them; and that gets a little bit more complicated. Again, we have three departments that have held these positions for us, and we move them into those departments. And so at that point, without getting too much into our classification system, you're looking at things the mandate of the organization and whether that person can actually reasonably put into that organization.

Abe: I'd also should mentioned too, now that I think about it, that we have people that apply from all across Canada. We're a big country, the United States is, and so geographically we're very large, and so we have people who are now in the program from Whitehorse, Yukon, in the north, to Vancouver, BC in the southwest, and then all the way out into Prince Edward Island in the far east of the country, and a bunch of different places in between.

Abe: So we've also had a lot of people apply from kind of all across the country. And then so once they get into the program, they stay where they are, but they just move their position from whatever department they were at into one of the organizations that's hiring the free agents.

Jacob: Okay so why not just have everybody be a free agent? Like thousands of people just say, "Hey, everybody apply to be a free agent." And just get hundreds of people every day applying for it. Why only have such a small group? I think recently a Sun article you said, "There's around 60 free agents." Why not 6,000?

Abe: Yeah, that's a really good question. You ask my boss, he would tell you that this is one of the things that he has always hoped for, was just the exponential growth of the program. The answer really is that we've designed it in a way to be linear in the way that it grows; not really exponential in that kind of way.

Abe: And for better for worse, and that could change over time, but really the idea right now is what we've learned, I think, as we've learned that when you give people autonomy and mobility in this sort of way, you create a real vulnerability for them, potentially, where failure is really there as a possibility.

Abe: And we want that, we want people to grow, we want people to stretch, we want them to learn, and that can really happen through failure. And I think it's one of the things that we reflect on a lot is, "What's the process of growth like?" In and organization like the public service, and what do we hope for people to learn over time?

Abe: We do want them to have a safe space to fail, but in order to create that safe space to fail, you have to do it really intentionally, and you have to provide the right supports. And so that means, for us, it really means growing in the right kind of way where, as best as we can, kind of maintain that community, maintain that culture, and maintain those supports, that structural support for people so that they don't feel kind of abandoned in the system where they're out there.

Abe: I would love to see a world where this grew really quickly, and we're an organization as the public service of Canada, of about 275,000 people. I think there's space for thousands and thousands of people to work this way; I've got lots of work that would be really interesting to kind of be organized in this kind of way.

Abe: And I am hopeful that there's a future that looks that, but for us, they way we've been thinking about it, I think it's also the resources that we have at our disposal. I think we're still not totally taken as seriously as I think we should be, but the way we want to grow it, is we really want to take care of the people as they try to experience what it's like to kind of be able to really author your career, to really make those decisions about your career.

Abe: And it requires, I think, in those cases some support. It's kind of what we've learned over time is that you can't just let people go, and fail, and sort of figure it out themselves; that we all kind of need that structural support. We need help, we need people to be looking out for us, to be supporting us through these times of transition, through these times of regularly occurring change.

Abe: It's just not the way our system is set up, and we don't have the structures, I think, in the public service to support this level of mobility yet. And I'm hopeful that we can get

the structures over time, but it requires a lot more institutional change, I think there's still some work to be done there.

Jacob: So after someone becomes a free agent ... So let's say today I got the notification, it says, "Congratulations, Jacob, you are now a free agent." So today is my first day, I'm assuming I no longer am the full-time Program Manager in transportation anymore; so I don't show up to work there.

Abe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jacob: So where do I go? And you said, "You find your own job." So how-

Abe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jacob: Does that work, and am I interviewing for these other jobs now, or am I just kind of part of the secret task force, and whenever somebody needs help, I kind of swoop in, help them out, and then I extract myself and go somewhere else?

Abe: Yeah. You know, I think there's no easy answer to that, because it's kind of whatever you want it to be, but structurally I mean, it's fairly straightforward. You're right, you end on a Friday, and then start on a Monday, that sort of thing or whatever; you start the next day in your new job.

Abe: That's the same way you change positions in the public services, you get offered a new position, you get offered a new job, then you start that job the next day. And there's other ways you can play around with that by taking leave, and stuff that. But, notionally, you just start your job the next day, and you're not the full-time Program Manager anymore; now you're a free agent.

Abe: But it really just means that you're doing another job, you found another opportunity of a manager who wants to hire you, who wants to pay for you to do the work that they have for you to do. And so you're maybe starting a six month project, you've signed a letter of agreement; we do these kind of MOUs between the organizations.

Abe: So let's use a concrete example. I'm a free agent, I've just been hired by Natural Resources Canada; that's our first department that hired free agents. I'm now an employee of Natural Resources Canada, I'm a free agent.

Abe: I have gone out, and I've looked around the public service for projects that I want to work on, and I found a project at Transport Canada, let's say; and they want to hire me. And maybe I came from Transport Canada, but it doesn't really matter, they want to hire me to do project management.

Abe: And so now I'm an employee of Natural Resources Canada, working for Transport Canada as a free agent for six months. Signed on for this, when I'm done that six month project, I find a new one and move on to my next project; and I kind of just keep following that pattern. When I'm finished a project, find a new one, and then I just move

on to it. So you're kind of just moving from project to project as long as you want, as long as you're a free agent.

Jacob: Interesting. Okay, so I complete the project, and then I find another project. So, basically I'm an internal gig worker. So within the Canadian public service, I'm basically a freelancer, but I'm a full-time freelancer inside the Canadian public service is what it sounds like?

Abe: Yeah, it's a good way of thinking about it. People use the word 'Internal Consultant' sometimes, I don't totally love that word because I'm not sure that it's the same as a consultant kind of model. It's similar in some ways, but I really like the idea of a gig worker too.

Abe: But, again, the difference here being there's protections, you have the benefits that the public service offers you. We're in a highly unionized environment, and so we have things pensions, and health benefits, and predictable employment, so guarantees, collective agreements through our unions.

Abe: You get to maintain all of that and, on top of that, also get some of the benefits of that kind of gig work, or that gig approach that you are sort of a resource that people can hire to work on projects, and that you get to kind of guide that. So it's a, I think ... Anyway, so far I like that we found that nice balance between the gig economy, but also protecting employees, and giving worker's rights a priority-

Jacob: Yeah-

Abe: Because that would be a dig deal.

Jacob: That's interesting because usually for most people who are gig workers, they don't get those types of benefits.

Abe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jacob: So in your case, you're an internal gig worker, but you get the benefits as a full-time employee does.

Abe: That's right. Yeah, so it's-

Jacob: Interesting.

Abe: Like we've managed to bridge that gap a little bit to give people that flexibility that they're really craving, but then, yeah, also kind of give them that predictability and that stability that they also want.

Jacob: Okay, that makes a lot of sense. And then, can these different projects that these free agents are working on, are they all six months? Can they be a couple of months, a couple of weeks, or are they all kind of a fixed time?

Jacob: And do you find that these free agents, can you do this forever, do they get burned out from this, do they get tired of this, can they go back to a regular a full-time Project Manager in transportation job if they want?

Abe: Yeah, yeah, I mean they definitely can; that's definitely an option. I think we see a lot of people do a lot of variable things, so just going to your first question about the options that are available to them, there's lots of different ways that they can structure.

Abe: That's, I think, one of the beauties of the program, with this sort of autonomy and flexibility, they really are the drivers for that; they and their managers who hire them. So if a manager needs you for six months, then great, if they need you for nine months, then great.

Abe: I've even been interested, and I've seen opportunities, where free agents have worked on two projects at once. So they were working for two different managers who are paying their salary in a joint kind of way. And they're doing 50 percent here, excuse me, and 50 percent there, and they're out there trying to figure out how to divide up their time in really interesting and different kinds of ways; so there's that level of flexibility.

Abe: I've seen people go as long as 18 months, two years; it's really up to you. I think at a certain point, if you wanted to do a five year project, it might not make sense to be a free agent, but it's definitely flexible in that kind of way.

Abe: And so people are allowed to be free agents as long as they want to be, we haven't set a time limit on how long you can be a free agent, but I think it does happen for different reasons. So we've, like I said, we've hired just about 90 free agents so far.

Abe: We've had, I think, now four people leave the program, and so for various reasons, most of the times it's because they've been given an offer somewhere else; a permanent offer somewhere else. And so you're an employee of these organizations that I've been talking about, these three organizations that have the positions.

Abe: At any time you can choose that you don't want to be a free agent anymore, and you found the job of your dreams. And that, I think, is what sort of generally happened in these cases is these free agents went out and they did projects, and they found the place that they wanted to be, and it's perfect for them, and that's where they just want to spend the foreseeable future for their career.

Abe: And so that's what they've sort of done, and so we've had a few people leave the program. And I think that's great, I actually see that as a metric of success because we found places for these people to call their permanent homes, or at least their temporary, permanent homes, I guess; and that's really great.

Abe: And we've only been around for four years, so I expect that'll continue to happen. We have predicted that people would leave a lot more frequently, and I think maybe it's a measure of our success that people have stuck around for so long; because I think they really appreciate it. Once you're a free agent, you kind of want to be-

Jacob: Yes-

Abe: A free agent.

Jacob: Seems kind of cool. So what happens if it takes me a long time to find a new program? Am I getting paid by anybody, am I doing any kind of work, do I still get the benefits?

Abe: Yeah, you do, and that's kind of the good news there for the employees; it is the risk that the departments are taking. We've sort of gotten approval from our management teams in these departments to hire these people to be these sort of permanent free agents, and they've taken the risk on those salaries. So if they're not doing a project for a different department, those organizations pay their salaries, and they've agreed to pay their salaries. We kind of refer to it as 'downtime'.

Abe: And I know it's kind of the same idea for consulting companies, you're not on billable hours, basically. And, yes, your pay is guaranteed, your benefits are guaranteed, everything's guaranteed. We've been really fortunate so far, we're in an environment where there's a ton of demand for project type work, right now, in the public service; I don't see that going anywhere, anytime soon.

Abe: There's been a real, I think ... We do have a large informal kind of employment economy in the public service, we have a lot of temporary employment that isn't free agent related, we hire a lot of consultants, and we hire a lot of casuals. And I don't see that temporary kind of project based work going anywhere, so I really do see that demand staying high. I think our downtime, overall over the past four years, it's been less than two percent of the total amount of time they're free agent.

Jacob: Wow.

Abe: And so 98 percent utilization, and I think that really goes to show you how much demand there is in the system. So, we've been lucky we've been able to demonstrate that you want to be an organization that takes these free agents in, and lets them go; it's actually pretty low risk for you.

Jacob: Yeah, I mean, and I the analogy that you gave earlier ... And, actually, some companies have called it this 'talent cloud', a 'people cloud'. So, basically, people as a service kind of idea where you just kind of have this group of free agents, of gig workers, of freelancers inside the organization who can roam around, and move around from place to place. And I think I saw an article where you wrote that this actually even helps them with a sense of purpose as well. Was that right?

Abe: Yeah, I mean, I think that's become a bit of the evolution of what this was ... I mean, I was always interested in, from the beginning, for that sort of idea. I've stumbled into a bunch of different jobs, and I've noticed people in their jobs always kind of feeling, in a lot of cases, feeling like they're just in the wrong job. And I think 275,000 people, you're bound to have a lot of people in those situations.

Abe: But one of the things I know is that's a real risk, I think, for the public service is that we have a lot of people who just aren't in the right job, they haven't found their purpose they haven't found the right place to be. I don't have the stats on that, it's more anecdotal just thinking about the people that I've seen, and the stories that I hear people tell but, I do see a lot of that.

Abe: And so the opportunity to choose your job, to have that autonomy to make those decisions, I think puts you in a better position to find your purpose. I just think, naturally, you're going to try to look for those opportunities that suit you better, you're going to think more, and self-reflect more about what environments you'll thrive in, what environments you won't thrive in, and to have that ability to choose; it leads to all sorts of other kinds of downstream benefits, I think, once you give people that ability. So, yeah, finding your purpose, I think, it's something we realized over time is, yeah, it's a potentially really interesting outcome to giving people this sort of autonomy for their jobs.

Jacob: Do you think organizations on the non-public side can learn from this, and apply this? Have you seen any companies reach out to you and say, "Hey, this free agent concept is pretty interesting, we want to do something like this internally. Any advice or feedback on what we should be doing?" Or is nobody talking about it?

Abe: You know, lots of governments have reached out to us. Just who are we presenting to a couple weeks ago, we are presenting to the government, the public service of Mongolia, we've presented to international governments in the UK, Australia, France, we presented a big government conference in Dubai.

Abe: But I would say, mostly it's been the public service that has been interested in us, and that's cool; I mean, I think we're sort of approaching it from a public sector context. I do imagine private sector organizations face similar sorts of challenges, and are interested in doing similar of those sorts of things. So, I mean obviously, I'm interested in talking to anybody and kind of sharing ideas, and hope to do that, obviously, through this conversation.

Abe: But I think, generally so far, it's been the public service. Especially in Canada, we have our provincial governments that have been very interested in the model. What I haven't seen yet is any of the governmental context that we've had the public services internationally, who have implemented the same model that we have.

Abe: Or even actually variations of it, I've still yet to see someone come back to us and say, "We've done this thing." Or, "We've implemented it the way that you came up with the idea." Or, "We've even taken it and adapted it to our context." Lots of interest, and I'm still hopeful that it will be adopted in other organizations, or even tailored to their own kind of specific context.

Jacob: Yeah, that would be pretty cool, I mean, I'm curious to see where this goes. And I realized I forgot to ask you at the beginning, why did you even do this to begin with? Is there something that's happening in the world of work, some trends that you're paying

attention to, that kind of forced you to create this kind of a program, or why not just leave things the way they were?

Abe: Yeah, I mean, and that's evolved over time too, and I could go down so many rabbit holes with this question. But the basic idea we were starting with was the changing nature of the issues that the public service faces, and that the government, in general, kind of faces. Just the rapid evolution of issues that the public service needs to try to solve.

Abe: And so the concept of GovCloud, the idea was, generally, that we create institutions in the public service to solve problems. We have a public health agency that was created in the response to the SARS epidemic. And that institutions still exists, I think we're talking 15 years later; I can't remember the exact timing. But, I don't think that was, necessarily, the intention.

Abe: And so we create these institutions, it's really heavy bureaucracy, it creates a big time burden, it can take forever, and we're just not agile; we haven't figured out an agile way to mobilize our workforce. And so, essentially, that was the beginning for this conversation was how can we create a more agile workforce that can solve some of these problems more flexibly, and sort of be able to deploy our resources as we need them, but then not create new permanent institutions to solve temporary problems?

Abe: And that was the basis for the idea. As its evolved over time, we started to definitely look more at the trends in the future of work, we're starting to think about multiple careers. We've had some conversations with folks from the Singularity University in San Francisco, Gary [Bowles 00:45:12], you might know Gary.

Abe: He came up had a good chat with us, and presented to us, and talked about what he's seeing in the future of work. And conversations about multiple careers for people, and the different kind of shifting expectations of people in their careers, and really what they're seeing in the trends in the future of work.

Abe: And the need for people to be able to shift careers, to have safe spaces to experience new ways of working, to have safe spaces to fail, and then to learn from their failure, and then grow from that. And that that being kind of the difference that we might see when we see more disruption.

Abe: I mean, and on your show, you talk a lot about automation, and artificial intelligence, and the impact that will have on the workplace. And it's something that really, I think, has seized our public service, but I haven't seen enough action being taken.

Abe: So what we're trying to do is to say, "Well, how do we create a workforce that responds differently to that? How do we maintain that sort of human side of work so that we're making sure that, while we might be automating some of our work, we don't leave anybody behind? We don't leave behind the people who might be more disrupted."

Abe: And so the free agent idea is also a little bit of a response to that. To think about well, maybe this model could be a way that we could evolve in response to some of the

automation pressures that we're feeling, some of the artificial intelligence technological adaptations that we're seeing, that are, potentially, disrupting the future of work.

Abe: And so it's not just happening in the private sector, it's happening in the public service. And our kind of argument, and I think the argument we're kind of trying to make, is that we may just need to come up with some creative solutions to think about how to take care of our workforce, how to make sure that people don't get left behind by some of these disruptions that we're seeing coming.

Jacob: Have you thought about ... And I don't know if this is part of what you've explored or not, universal basic income? I know there's been a lot of topic, or a lot of discussion around that. Have you thought about that, what are your thoughts about that?

Abe: I think the concept's really interesting. I know there've been a couple of pilots in Canada, I know there've been some pilots internationally. Yeah, I mean worker protections, I think, will be really important for the future. And I think it's important that we're kind of trying out some of those things.

Abe: I think what we're also trying to do is kind of get a more of an experimental learning mindset in the public service, so that we can try those kinds of ideas out, and see how they work, gather evidence about those sorts of ideas so that we can make policy recommendations.

Abe: I mean, generally, my job as a public servant is just to sort of give advice and inform policy that the government of the day makes, the decisions the government of the day makes. But I think we have a lot of opportunities to be that place where we experiment with those ideas, for new ways to support people for the future of work.

Abe: And so, yeah, and I think this is also trying to set us up to be able to do that better, to be able to try more things, to experiment a little bit with new ideas in response to the changing nature of work, and universal basic income could easily be one of those things we can try out.

Jacob: You mentioned the future of work and trends a couple minutes ago. What are some of the big trends that you're paying attention to that you think are shaping and impacting the future of work?

Abe: Yeah, and I think demographics is one of the big ones. We do definitely see some differences in the expectations of the workforce. Younger people are coming into the workforce, that trend, I think, is really interesting. I think we're starting to see different expectations about what the employee experience is like; and so, we have to respond to that.

Abe: We have to be able to think about the employee lifecycle a lot more, because people have higher expectations about what it's like to work, the sort of supports that they have, work/life balance, the availability of technology to work in different locations.

Abe: We're seeing a lot of stuff in the public service around remote work, we're a large public service, and so we're starting to see a lot more interest in working remotely. We have a lot more teams that are practicing distributed work, so work that sort of takes place across different geographies, and so we have to be able to respond to that.

Abe: Yeah, and then I've talked a little bit about sort of the pressures from the gig economy, the desire for people to work in that kind of way, but also still have the protections that they're seeking; and so, yeah, so we're definitely impacted by that.

Abe: And then also the other things I talked about like the technological side of things with artificial intelligence, and automation of work will be hugely disruptive, I think, for us as well. There's definitely the potential there for people to be in precarious job situations, and that's something we don't want to happen.

Abe: So, yeah, we're a small program, we won't have major, I don't think, impact, but I think we're at least starting the conversation for those sorts of areas. We're starting to get people to think more about what a model might look for the future that would be more adaptive for those sorts of changes; the sort of future of work elements.

Abe: And we're at least, I think, trying to get people to think a little bit about the workforce model that we have today, and how it might evolve over time to sort of respond to those future challenges.

Jacob: Well we talked about pretty much everything I could think of as far as this program. I mean, is there anything else that you want people to know about the free agent program, or any advice that you want to impart for listeners who are thinking about maybe doing something similar or experimenting with this?

Abe: Well, yeah. I mean, the one thing I think about with this program and I think we're sort of heading towards the future is using it as a place to test ideas. I kind of alluded to that, but we have a really interesting group of people who are resilient, who are flexible, who are thinking about the future, who want to see positive change happen in our organization.

Abe: And we found them, we put them into a place, and they're really receptive to some of these new ideas of these new ways of working. And so we're practi- ... I could go on, and on, and on about this stuff, we're practicing all kinds of different ways of doing HR, different ways of talent management, performance management; and I've only kind of touched on some of the ideas that we're trying to practice.

Abe: So what's been really interesting about program is it's created this opportunity to kind of test out different ways of doing work. It's also given us an opportunity to use data, I think there's a future where we will collect a lot more data; we're already collecting a lot of data, but using that data to support people.

Abe: We're looking into things credentials, badges, digital identity for the free agents, and how we can adopt those sorts of practice at the public service. Trying out these new

ideas, we're testing out block certs, so blockchain based credentials for the free agents. Whereas a lot of people might be hesitant to try these things out, and to test out new ideas, we've got a group of people that, I think, are really keen to be at the forefront of some of these ideas.

Abe: And so by creating this program, we've kind of set up a bit of a testing ground for some of the future of work stuff that I think is really interesting. And there's a lot of work that is left to be done, and we're just kind of the tip of the iceberg on some of those things, and I think we'll go a lot deeper as it evolves.

Abe: But, yeah, I think it's a really interesting thing to be a part of because there's so many opportunities to go down a little rabbit holes here and there about what's possible, and it's just really interesting to be in a space where you can practice on those things in the public service.

Abe: I think no one would, necessarily, think about the public service in this way from the outside, in particular, but I'm just amazed with the people that we have, and their willingness to sort of try new things, and experiment with these different ideas around talent, and the future of work.

Jacob: And I think the programs are pretty cool. I mean, I'm not aware of too many organizations or governments, for that matter, that are thinking about it from this perspective of free agents; so I think it's very interesting. And I'm very curious to see where this will evolve in the coming years, but where can people go to learn more about this program, or about you? I know you have a couple of articles that you have authored that have been out there that talk about this as well, but anything that you want to mention for people, please feel free to do so.

Abe: Sure, yeah, I think the easiest way is to start by ... you can always find us just by Googling a little bit about us. We're not at really a place that where we have too much of a public presence; that'll probably change over time. But if you Google 'free agents', you'll come up with free agents government Canada, you'll come with all kinds of little tidbits about us.

Abe: You'll find me out there, you can find me on LinkedIn, on Twitter; I'm pretty findable. I write blogs on medium all the time about the work that we're doing, there's lots of little tidbits of information out there. And if you want anything else, if you ever want to reach out and talk about this, learn from my experience, go deeper into some of the things that I've touched on, I'm always available, so happy to chat.

Jacob: Very cool. Well, Abe, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to speak with me.

Abe: My pleasure, Jacob, thanks for inviting me.

Jacob: Of course. And thanks everyone for tuning in. Again, my guest has been Abe Greenspoon, he's the Program Lead for Canada's free agents program, which is part of

the Canadian public service. He's pretty easy to find online, and you can also Google the program as well. So that's it for us, and I will see all of you next week.