

## **Investment in HR crucial as labour shortage still looms**

By Sandra Sweet

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Qualified people are still in high demand in Calgary, according to Calgary Economic Development (CED).

CED's Elsbeth Mehrer, manager of workforce development, admitted that while there are more people than jobs in some skill areas, "accounting, finance and administration are areas where there is still a mismatch of talent. We may have some people who are unemployed, but they may not be the same people who are required in other areas."

This is not the time for companies to become complacent about recruitment, she added. "Calgary companies that think they can cherry pick from the best of the best talent should think again."

Alberta's unemployment rate has risen to 5.8% in March, up from 3.4% a year earlier, Julie Ball, executive director of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce Talent Pool, said. However, she added, full employment is estimated to be between 4 and 5% in Canada so Alberta's current unemployment rate signifies a balanced labour market. In such a market, employers need to continue to pay attention to human resources and their employment proposition. "This is not the time to be pulling back on human resources. Don't think this economic downturn is going to solve the skilled labour shortage," she said.

Mehrer agreed, adding that the structural changes taking place in the labour market due to retiring baby boomers is going to contribute to the continued shortage, regardless of the economy.

The Chamber and CED recognized early on that shortages of skilled labour and professionals were going to be an issue both for current Calgary businesses and shortages of skilled labour and professionals were going to be an issue both for current Calgary business and companies the city is trying to attract.

That is why the Chamber founded the Talent Pool in 2003. the Talent Pool, Ball said, works with business to give them information and link them to pools of untapped talent. Using traditional recruiting methods during the tight labour market last year proved difficult for many organizations. Some resorted to going overseas to find skilled workers then had to wait many months for these workers to get the required work visas. There were, and still are, under-utilized skilled workers in Calgary. The system used to recruit people did not extend to reach this untapped pool.

Some employers, she added, also only accept electronically submitted resumes and will not accept unsolicited resumes. As well, applicant-tracking software often screens out qualified prospects because the resume does not contain the required key words, or the candidate may describe their skills and work experience differently depending on their cultural background.

“Don’t abandon your people system during this time,” she said. “You might not feel the pinch right now, but you will once things start to turn around. It takes four years for a high school graduate to get an engineering degree (companies) should give young people career information even if the jobs will not be immediately available. You need to continue to plan.”

She also said companies often overlook youth, older workers, Aboriginals and persons with disabilities, and they could do more to target immigrants already in Calgary.

CED itself started the CalgaryWorks initiative in 2006 to complement the Talent Pool. We recognize that CED has a role to play in support of employers on a people attraction level,” Mehrer said. “While we may have people who are unemployed right now, we recognize we don’t have the home grown talent that we’ll need to fill the roles when the economy turns around.”

Strong practices developed during the economic growth in Calgary are paying off today, she added. Companies that positioned themselves well are now able to make measured decisions in terms of staffing, instead of cutting staff. “Companies recognize that they need to figure out how to hold on to their people as best they can. I am seeing some attempts to shift work around, go to reduced hours, practices of job sharing, rather than immediate job cuts.”

Standens, a manufacturing company with an 85 year history in Calgary, understands the importance of investing in human resource development, regardless of the times. John Simpson, director of human resources said that, although their HR practices have shifted, retention is always a goal.

“The recession has hit manufacturing quite a bit in Canada. But we don’t believe in layoffs. We try to keep our staff busy any way we can,” he said. Standens has taken advantage of the federal job-sharing program, a government program that allows employees to cut their hours to avoid layoffs while taking only a minimal pay cut.

“You are able to keep people employed. During the time when they are not working, you can engage them in work training that will further their careers in the long term so when we come out of the recession, we’ll be even more competitive,” he said.

Mehrer said that even with the economic downturn the city is no further ahead in terms of the labour shortage. There is still a misalignment between the available workforce in this province and the demand for specific positions within Calgary businesses. “We will continue to have a shortage until we can align our demand with the talents of our workforce.”

Geoff Pradella, Chamber Public Affairs Vice President said that the Calgary Chamber of Commerce regularly surveys its members to identify their top business concerns. “For the past couple of years the shortage of skilled workers was their number one concern. Now it doesn’t even make the list but workforce development does.”

He added that the Chamber is encouraging companies to use the economic downturn to review their development and recruitment strategies. "The Chamber has organized a career show in each of the past four years: it is planning the 2009 show (to be held October 30 and 31) with business needs in mind and the show will strongly focus on career information and the preparation required for specific careers rather than jobs for people now."

For more information on The Career Show, contact Cynthia MacDonald at [cmacdonald@calgarychamber.com](mailto:cmacdonald@calgarychamber.com) or visit <http://www.thecareershow.ca/index.html>.