

BC Skills Force Initiative
June 15, 2005
Courtenay, BC

AGENDA

1. Introduction of facilitators Paul Wiest & Ron Trepanier
2. Introduced the BC Skills Force Initiative
3. Introduction of participants
4. Overview of project
5. Background research
6. Focus Group discussion
7. Next steps
8. Wrap up

Comments and Discussion

Employer Labour Needs

- Most employers in attendance currently do not have any vacant positions
- Finding seasonal workers has been an issue
- Difficulty finding full-time workers. Businesses compensate by having more part-time workers to address the issue
- The Comox Region attracts a number of highly skilled people
- This results in a skill mismatch between jobs available and the worker; individuals tend to be skilled beyond what the businesses require
- There is also mismatch between wage expectations of skilled individuals and what a small business can afford to pay
- Comox Region attracts a number of early retirees that are highly skilled
- This has created an issue of younger, less skilled workers losing out to older skilled workers who have recently moved to the area
- Compensation is an issue for retaining younger workers. They are leaving for larger centres in search of higher paying jobs
- The group noted that businesses that hire trades people are having a hard time finding skilled workers
- Rural centres can't compete with urban wage levels when trying to attract trades people
- An added difficulty in attracting skilled workers to the area is the issue of finding jobs for the spouse

Skills and Education

- Employers are looking for "people skills" combined with necessary technical skills
- Certain skills such as teamwork and communication are important
- If an employee has soft skills, then the employer is willing to teach the technical or business-specific skills
- Can teach an employee to do the job, but it is difficult dealing with a lack of common courtesy skills
- Some employers have internal training programs for unskilled workers
- Businesses prefer to train based on their own specific needs

School System

- o Perception of too much hand holding of students within high schools
- o Youth are not prepared to be on their own after graduation
- o Schools lack an entrepreneurial/small business focus
- o Schools are not very entrepreneurial within their own structure
- o School system has the difficult challenge of having to deal with negative parental influences. Today, we give our kids everything. As such they lack a sense of reality when they graduate

Career and Personal Planning

- Good programs exist but they need to be better delivered
- There needs to be a better fit between students and employer groups
- Too often students in co-op programs simply go through the motions. They are often not interested in work placement
- Decrease in CAP program funding runs against what businesses want
- Need to invite employers and trades people in the schools to discuss career options

Training support

- Employers' rational for why federal/provincial governments should provide support for training
 - tax credits for training is not a subsidy
 - there is a business case to be made: investing in training results in higher salary for employee - therefore tax for government
 - would make fiscal sense for government
 - improves productivity of the workforce in general
- Need to simplify the process for businesses gaining access to information about training programs
- Business owners also need professional development: issues are lack of time and money
- First step is appreciation of what employers do not know
 - need for awareness
 - do not know what we do not know
- Business owners can not see forest for the trees
- How do we raise awareness of business owners?
 - Believe BC ads
 - Certificate course for small business

Attitudes

- There is a general sense that employers are less willing to take on apprentices in the area:
 - Recent restructuring of the apprenticeship program has hurt
 - Feeling of lack of control by employers regarding the apprenticeship programs
 - Employers often lose the employee once they get their ticket
 - They also lose their workers for six weeks for out-of-town schooling. Small business employers can not afford this
- Small businesses tend to be a feeder system for the larger employers
- How can small businesses act as a potential feeder to industry and yet make it work for their own needs
- More so, how can large businesses co-operate to help small business, creating good relations between them
- Large industry can share human resources information not available to small businesses

- Issue of how we reduce the number of transient workers is also an important one. Transient workers and employee turnover make employers cautious about investing in employee training

Infrastructure

- Private training institutions, versus public institutions, have a better ability to change with employers' needs
- Public institutions are seen as too slow to react to businesses needs
- Governments need to look at employer focused programs versus unemployed focused when looking at skill needs
- Improved local access to apprenticeship programs is needed

Hiring Practices/HR Strategies

Employer perspectives

- o Employers are forced to be more flexible to retain skilled workers
- o Many are targeting those who come to the area looking for lifestyle
- o Understanding what the employer has to work with and being flexible with the employee's needs are important
- o There is a large talent pool in the area
- o Comox Valley is seen as an attractive area therefore a lot of skilled employees are moving there
- o Employers need to focus on older workers. For example there are lots of retired military. They can be recruited as seasonal/part-time workers
- o Need to make it a fun place to work

Compensation Packages

- o Bonus programs for increased sales could be considered
- o Retirement benefits/extended health care are options
- o Benefits/stock options are attractive to employees
- o Need to create a structure for small businesses to access attractive employee benefits to address competition from larger employers
- o Deliver a training certificate program within work
- o Small businesses need to find the time to address issue of benefits and compensation programs -- Government could make it easier for business (i.e.: tools such as a "how to" manual could be developed to help businesses create incentive packages for their employee)
- o Training tax credit for business are needed
- o "How to" guide for compensation package
- o "How to" guide for human resources training/recruitment
- o Before implementing a benefits program, employers need to see the business case. They need to conduct a cost benefit analysis
- o Mentorship programs are needed for owners to help them with developing human resource strategies

- Those who mentor should be compensated for this
- Issue of finding the proper match for mentorship is critical

Succession Planning

- Business owners can see the future impact and recognize that they need to do something about succession for themselves and key employees
- They are not dealing with the issue at this time, because most owners are too busy running their business

Immigration strategies

- Need the proper infrastructure to attract people to rural communities
- Immigration support system is needed in Comox Valley
- Area has a lot to offer for immigrants
- There is the issue of varying training standards from country to country
- We need to establish fair certification programs to allow immigrants to demonstrate they have the technical skills necessary to meet Canadian standards

Final Comments

- Subsidy for training
 - Tax credits are needed to help small businesses
 - Capacity building for small business sector is required
- Compensation - minimum wage mentality exists in the small business sector
 - They need to look at other compensation programs
 - Incentive based programs
 - Benefit programs
- Creation of a "how to" guide for employee benefits programs is needed
- Should have greater linkages between large and small businesses around the issues of human resource strategies and apprentice programs
- Closer linkage is needed between business and education system