

BC Skills Force Initiative
Summary of Focus Group Session
May 31, 2005
Fernie, BC

AGENDA

1. Introduction of facilitators Paul Wiest & Ron Trepanier
2. Introduced the BC Skills Gap Initiative
3. Introduction of participants
4. Overview of project
5. Background Research
6. Focus Group Discussion
7. Next steps
8. Wrap Up

Comments & Discussion

Employer Labour Needs:

- Seven businesses identified themselves as being short staffed
- Significant shortages exist in the trades in general and other technical skills (i.e., Carpentry, Joiner, BC Registered Massage Therapists, Estheticians, Campsite and marina workers, labourers)
- Seasonal businesses are having difficulty finding staff for peak seasons
- Lack of work permits are an issue for some non-Canadian citizens who are available to work during seasonal employment
- Compensation is also an issue as employees will not work for minimum wage, yet many business owner can not afford to pay more
- There is the issue of transient workers - those who stay for a couple of months then move on
- Employers need highly skilled workers willing to work on a part time basis as well, since they often cannot provide full-time employment
- Money is not always an issue, but it appears the younger generation is very mobile. They want to work for a while, then travel
- Hiring highly skilled workers from other countries is an option because they are here for one year on visitor's permits and want to experience the lifestyle
- Employers find it difficult to create full-time, year-round employment given the seasonal nature of the work in the area
- "Underground" employment depletes the labour pool - many employees are working for cash
- Slow shoulder season makes it difficult to attract workers who need full-time work
- Drug and alcohol abuse is a more predominate issue with younger workers
- Employers have a preference for mature workers, but there is no supply

Skills & Education:

- There is a need for more trades training
- Most of the younger workers lack the attitude that employers are looking for, when hiring
- Many workers lack basic skills (i.e., cash system knowledge, simple math, customer service skills, positive attitude, good manners, life skills, good hygiene, communication skills, sense of responsibility, loyalty)
- If an employee has a good attitude, employers are willing to train them even though it takes at least a year, and often the employee then leaves the employment
- Employers are prepared to offer training but they would like some help
- Safety training is an important issue in the trades
- Work place ethics are lacking among many workers
- Need for a strict policy on how workers are paid based on trade school completion - incentives could be provided based on increased skills
- Trades training in BC is not at par with the standards of the European and Australian models
- Importance of employers having training plans was emphasized
- Many trades people have migrated to Alberta because of the support that is offered for apprentices
- Trades training is not being provided locally by the College
- Trades are not seen as an attractive career path
- Employers believe the school system needs to be promoting trades as a worthy career path
- In general, there is a need for more trades programs at the Colleges - there is nowhere for workers to go locally for their apprenticeship
- The local need has changed, but the training opportunities have not
- Employers need financial support while their employees are at trades school

Infrastructure:

- Housing issues are having a huge impact because employees can not afford to live in Fernie
- Affordable housing is the biggest issue in retaining employees in Fernie and will impact local employers for the next 10 years
- Bit of a catch 22 - there is a lack of affordable housing for workers, but there is not enough skilled labour to help build suitable accommodation
- Out-of-towners are buying places in town, fixing them up and increasing the rent. Locals cannot afford the housing
- Long waiting lists for trades training creates a barrier for younger workers to get the necessary training
- There is a serious lack of local training opportunities for trades

Attitudes

- Some employers find it difficult to get employee loyalty from their staff, but when they offered training, staff responded well
- Drug and alcohol abuse is very challenging to deal with as an employer
- Seasonality is an issue for an economy built on tourism with its shoulder seasons. Solutions include: employee sharing with other employers in the same type of business - this is a win/win for employers and employees, and flexibility of schedules in order to accommodate staff needs if they are working more than one job
- For manufacturers - the market is not in Fernie but they need skilled, trades people and can provide full-time work. Because of the lack of skilled help, they find they are backed up in their production schedules and are turning down work
- Trades have not been marketed properly in Canada. It is not viewed as an appealing career like the high tech or academic stream
- Young workers need to be taught that they can advance in any company but they need to earn it and accept the fact that they need to start out at the low level jobs to prove themselves
- Dressing appropriately is an issue with many employees - the problem is a difficult one to enforce with today's fashions
- Mind set from parents that are employed by a union employer at the mines etc., is another factor. Their children are resistant to the minimum wage reality of many small businesses
- Work ethic is an issue - Fernie is a party town and many young workers show up in no condition to work

- Fernie is an attractive place that people want to come to. Some local employers advertise across Canada with an ad that invites workers to “Live in the Rocky Mountains”. To date response has been low
- On Sundays, main street closes and it is difficult for those businesses who want to remain open to provide services to tourists

Succession Planning

- A few employers have succession plans in place, but most do not seem concerned about this issue
- Succession planning as owners/operators - the European model may be something to consider. They have generational succession plans
- Fernie’s economy is in transition - young people need to understand where the opportunities are
- City of Fernie recently hired local kids to undertake an exploration of the job needs of youth during their formative teenage years
- Very few small business owners have family members interested in taking over their businesses. Most of their kids can see how hard their parents work, and they do not want to be the second generation in the business

Hiring Practices/HR Strategies

- Hiring process takes place locally in most cases
- There are job descriptions for every level of trades person and every level is provided with training
- Employers are willing to invest in employee training programs despite the high cost
- Some companies provide ski passes and flexibility regarding work on “powder days”. Example given - Journeyman cabinet maker - highly valued employee so he is given what he needs in order to keep him. Employers need ten more like him
- There is not an “older worker” issue in this community
- There are lots of young people available but they lack the skills and attitudes
- There is the ability to move up in any job but you have to earn it
- Some employers only hire a certain number of local employees because the employee does not have the expectation to be employed full-time, year-round - need to find a balance
- Internet has been successful in terms of getting qualified employees in the City of Fernie (70 to 80 applications per

advertisement). However, the trades do not have this same experience

- Hard to gear up for work when the local training supports are not there

Final Comments

- The local education system is out of touch, they do not develop the appropriate skills sets in their students
- Work place skills need to be identified in elementary school, begin exposure to real work situations in high school and carry through to their College education
- Job skills need to be taught in school so when students graduate they are employable right away
- Work experience programs in high school need to be taken more seriously and more guidance needs to be provided
- Work ethic starts at home, but the education system has to fill the gap in situations where home support is not provided
- Short-term trades programs do not fix the problem - they need to be long-term
- This must start now in order to support our economy in the long term
- Endorsement of "ambassador program" for communities