



Small business owners say skills shortage issue is more serious in northern BC

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WHISTLER, BC – Small business owners and operators in northern British Columbia say they are missing out on key business opportunities because they can't find the skilled labour they require. In particular, the recent resurgence in mining and a booming oil and gas industry are luring workers away to higher paying jobs.

Unlike larger employers, small business owners don't have the same capacity or access to the same types of resources needed to properly train employees to take on more responsibilities. Small businesses – defined as having 50 employees or less – represent 98 per cent of all businesses operating in the province and employ some 971,000 people. The majority of small businesses are owner-operated, have less than five employees and are involved in everything from retail stores and auto repair shops to small manufacturing operations.

The findings are included in the BC Skills Force Initiative which surveyed over 2,000 small businesses in non-metropolitan British Columbia. The report goes on to say that many small businesses believe that the education system is not providing the basic skills employers need from new workers. This is compounded by the fact that employers feel they don't have input to improve school curriculum and training programs.

A key recommendation made in the Skills Force Report is a call for senior governments to create regional small business advisory groups across the province. This will enable small business owners to coordinate strategies with educational institutions, small business service providers and government to address on-going and future skills issues.

The BC Skills Force project is a joint initiative of the British Columbia Chamber of Commerce and the Community Futures Development Association of BC (CFDA). The Government of Canada (Service Canada) and the Province of BC (Ministry of Economic Development) contributed funding to this initiative.

“Now more than ever, employers have to recognize that a fundamental shift has occurred. It’s gone from being an employer’s market to being an employee’s market. Small business owners now have to shift the way that they recruit, train and retain employee,” says Bob Wright, Chairperson, Community Futures Development Association of BC.

“It is very frustrating to see that businesses are missing out on valuable business opportunities that would help grow our provincial economy,” says John Winter, President of the BC Chamber of Commerce. “However, this report gives us the information we need to engage the northern business community in developing and implementing the strategies that will lead us to resolve the skills shortage facing our Province.”

The BC Skills Force Initiative conducted a telephone survey and also a series of focus groups across British Columbia. The only regions excluded from the survey were Greater Vancouver and Greater Victoria. Small Business (50 employees or less) represents 98% of all businesses operating in the province. The most recent census (2003) recorded 359,600 small businesses in British Columbia employing 971,900 people and generating nearly 30% of the province’s gross domestic product (GDP).

A full copy of the BC Skills Force Initiative report is available at www.bcskillsforce.com

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