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Smaller firms joining overseas job fair talent hunt

Companies looking for permanent employees at job fairs

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By Monte Stewart - Business Edge

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Canadian participation in overseas job fairs is on the rise as companies and governments alike attempt to offset skilled-labour shortages.

"It seems to be generally increasing and the size of companies is changing in that some of these missions - with groups of companies and governments - make it possible for smaller companies to participate," says Kerry Jothen, CEO of Victoria-based Human Capital Strategies, which assists companies, governments and First Nations with hiring.

In June, about 9,000 British subjects seeking employment in Canada attended job fairs in London and Leeds.

People lined up like prospective Rolling Stones ticket buyers for a chance to speak with representatives from a total of 22 Canadian companies and governments during the events staged by British firm Working In.



Photo courtesy of Opportunities Expo Canada
Prospective British recruits line up for a skilled-trades job fair hosted by Canadian firms in London.

"In the past, before there were fairs overseas, quite often it was a large corporation that (went overseas to recruit)," says Jothen. "Now, with more of a co-operative approach involving governments and industry associations, there are instances where smaller companies, who could not otherwise do it, are participating."

Statistics Canada figures show professional, scientific and technical services hired 37,000 people in June. The sector's job growth has ranked among the highest in the country over the past year and was the only sector that saw a notable employment increase last month.

Jothen, former head of the B.C. government's Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission, says the events are making a difference when it comes to recruiting skilled personnel. But they do not result in a huge influx of new

employees.

"Obviously, (employers) don't go overseas to recruit somebody for low-skilled jobs," he says. "These tend to be professional and trade-type of jobs."

"The numbers aren't large in the overall scheme of things, but they're important positions that (employers) can't seem to fill by going to other provinces."

In other words, the overseas events do not meet the labour force's demand as more Boomers retire and largest immigrant demographic - people aged 18-34 - declines. Recruits are relatively few as companies match prospects with their hiring needs and attempt to get newcomers through the Canadian immigration process.

Participants in last month's job fairs in Britain included Wardrop Engineering Inc., a national firm; Calgary-based bus company Southland Transportation; the Alberta government; and MDA Space Missions Engineering, the Vancouver-based company whose sale to U.S. interests was blocked earlier this year by the federal government on national security grounds.

"We hadn't really done a whole lot of international recruitment before," says David Rempel, Wardrop's manager of talent acquisitions, from his Toronto office. "So this is not only an opportunity for us to recruit good people, but to go on a fact-finding mission and see what we want to do and how exactly we want to do it."

Wardrop, which specializes in mining, infrastructure and energy, exhibited at the fairs as part of its bid to recruit engineers, designers, managers and product-controls.

The firm needs to hire upward of 100 people across all of its divisions, but expects to get 10-15 from its foray into Britain.

Canadian employers that exhibited in England are looking to hire permanent skilled immigrants, as opposed to temporary foreign workers, whom labour unions claim are often mistreated.

Wardrop chose to go to England because the firm felt the culture gap would be narrower, it would be easier to have British credentials recognized in Canada, and many Brits are keen to relocate here.

June Read, Southland Transportation's general manager of customer relations, says her firm's participation at the Working In events marked an "extreme" measure on the company's part. But it has been unable to hire enough full-time journeymen mechanics who are needed to sign off on provincially authorized bus-safety inspections.

"I was getting the extremes, the guy who is really qualified but only wants to work part-time or the young man who is just getting started and he wants an apprenticeship. But that's not what I need," Read says.

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Southland was looking for 15 journeymen, preferably in their 30s, because most of its veteran mechanics are in their 50s and approaching retirement. Read says being able to meet an overseas recruit makes the hiring process easier.

"It's not like I'm seeing someone via video or Skype," says Read. "I actually know who they are. I sat and interviewed both the husband and wife. So I have a sense of understanding that it's not just his idea to go to Canada. There is really engagement on the part of both of them."

Read adds it has become difficult to hire Canadian skilled-trades workers because, many years ago, their talent was not acknowledged and high school students were not encouraged to enter the trades.

"Now, (the skilled-trades shortage) is the price that we're having to pay for that mistake," she says. "Not everyone needs to be a brain surgeon."

Communities that find it even harder to attract people because they are outside urban centres are also increasing their participation in overseas recruitment fairs - with varied success. In B.C., the Comox Valley's economic development authority has promoted the Vancouver Island region at events in France and elsewhere, while Venture Kamloops has sold the benefits of the city at events in several countries around the globe.

While Jothen favours expansion of temporary foreign worker programs, he says Canada may have to look for permanent skilled immigrants from countries, such as Mexico, that now provide many temps for lesser-skilled positions.

"If you look at Canada ... in terms of labour-force supply, the future is immigrants," he says."

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