

SKILLS SHORTAGE

B.C. is facing a massive skills shortage, which unless corrected, is leading to a future of lagging productivity, loss of competitiveness and economic stagnation, warns the BC Chamber of Commerce.

Among its research findings, the Chamber notes, "the number of qualified immigrants with trade skills is no longer filling the demand. In 2002 only three per cent of the 53,000 skilled immigrants arriving in Canada had trades certificates; 57 per cent had bachelor's degrees.

Kerry Jothen, president and CEO of consultancy Human Capital Strategies says, "A skills shortage is evident across the board, from construction and advanced manufacturing to health care, tourism and even retail."

Jothen cautions that migration from other provinces is no panacea. For example, while B.C. has more than \$70 billion in construction projects planned to 2010, Alberta has over \$79 billion in major projects planned to 2008. Ontario's economy is also robust.

"There are plenty of opportunities for workers in other jurisdictions," says Jothen.

As a result, the Chamber advocates government policy that would include continuing support for B.C.'s Industry Training Authority (ITA), an organization that, in its inaugural year, has already proved successful by reaching some of its three-year targets in its first year, including the introduction of pilot programs to increase apprenticeship opportunities for high school students.

Jothen, who chairs the Chamber's Critical Skills Task Force, says government must also remove barriers that inhibit small and medium-sized businesses from hiring and training workers.

"A human resources tax credit would help companies offset the cost of training," he says. "As well, to encourage apprenticeship training, employers need greater flexibility in terms of removal of red tape and access to modular, competency-based training models."

Jothen adds that the federal-provincial labour market development agreement needs an overhaul to make the most of policies, leverage better results and to "push professions and licensing bodies to be more flexible and streamlining of the credential recognition process, so we can put highly skilled immigrants to work in their professions." □