

From trades to tech

EMPLOYEES' MARKET | Plumbers, professors will be in demand, but without the right ticket you're in for a rough ride

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Graduates of the University of B.C.'s wood-products processing program typically have at least five job offers before the ink is dry on their degrees.

In Whistler, a homebuilding company has been advertising for the past three months for trained carpenters and so far, not a single qualified applicant has applied.

By contrast, the high-school grad looking for the kind of job on a greenchain that used to pay enough to keep two cars in the driveway and a cottage at the lake will now be facing a dead end.

It's the reality of job demand in Canada, where demographics, changing technology and an increasingly global market are combining to create a new road map to career prosperity.

For some areas such as nursing, cooking, accounting or electrical services - the green light is clear. For others, such as teaching and information and technology services, the road doesn't appear so wide open, but a look at labour and demographic forecasts for the coming years show the jobs will be there.

The areas of high job demand are varied, but the jobs share a common factor: Overwhelmingly, the highest job growth is in areas that require post-secondary training and education. The slowest growth areas are reserved for unskilled and low-skilled jobs.

So if you're thinking high school graduation is a ticket to a lucrative career - you're liable to find it hardly pays the rent.

"As we've looked at the statistics over time, we are finding most of the jobs need some post-secondary education or training," said Shirley Bond, B.C.'s advanced education minister. "In virtually every sector, we are looking at a need for more training."

Bond said demographics, with a growing population of retirees, is pushing up demand across the board - for everything from plumbers and gasfitters to chefs and hospitality workers, to people for the aerospace industry, transportation and university professors.

Some areas, such as B.C.'s forest industry, aren't attracting enough newcomers to fill demand because the perception is that jobs are scarce and shrinking. But in fact, universities aren't turning out enough grads to meet the demand in forestry, both to fill jobs as people retire and to take up new positions in the growing fields of wood processing and forest resources management.

"We are seeing a shift in the numbers that reflects the changing nature of education," said Bond, of the job needs in the forest industry. "When you visit a mill today, it's

high-tech and computerized, much more than even five or 10 years ago."

The B.C. government is taking steps on several fronts in an attempt to narrow the skills shortage, from a doubling of spots for electrical and computer science engineering students to programs like the one announced earlier this week in which carpentry training is being revamped to produce skilled trades people on a stream-lined schedule. However, image is a problem - whether it's students reading of mill closures and turning away from careers in forestry or pushy parents who think their little darlings are more suited to careers as doctors and lawyers than plumbers or animators. (If you've tried to hire a plumber lately, you'll know the line up is a lot longer than the one at your lawyer's office.)

Rod Nadeau, whose company Nadeau and Associates builds houses in Whistler, can't find anyone to fill carpentry, site supervisory and foremen's jobs at rates paying from \$25 to \$35 an hour.

"All the responses we are getting are from people with no experience," he said. "We have had no qualified people responding to our ads."

"We're trying to hire career carpenters. All we're getting is apprentices and you can't only have people learning with no one on the job to teach them."

The expectations of parents and kids aren't in synch with the job markets of today and the future. While parents and, to a large extent, our education system, are pushing students towards universities, the reality is only 30 per cent actually go to colleges and universities and only 19 per cent graduate with a degree.

It's important to note that not all jobs call for academic studies. A full 60 per cent of new job openings in 2008 will be in skilled trades and technology jobs, which will require education and training outside universities.

With the average age of trades people in B.C. at 47, new workers are as likely to find job openings for plumbers and drywallers as they would for doctors and business managers if they graduated with medical degrees and MBAs.

"It is not the case that we should promote education or trades, we need it all" said Kerry Jothen, chief executive officer of Human Capital Strategies and author of several reports on skills shortages. "If you look in all those areas - technology, trades, business and finance, health and jobs in the technical area where you need a degree in social science, applied science or engineering - that whole area is growing faster than the average in the labour market."

According to the Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS), B.C. will see more than 695,000 job

openings in the decade from 2001 to 2011. Of those, more than 296,000 will be a result of growth in demand for goods and services and retiring baby boomers will leave another 399,000 openings.

Jothen points out that B.C.'s job growth will be divided almost equally between management and professional jobs, at 32 per cent of the total; technical and skilled jobs at 31 per cent and semi

skilled and labouring jobs at 36 per cent. That means post-secondary education and training will be required for at least two-thirds of the job openings between now and 2011.

The 2010 Olympics, with huge projects ranging from highway improvements, to rapid transit and the Vancouver exhibition and convention centre, are estimated to add another 268,000 jobs to the economy, pushing demand for skilled labour even higher.

"There is a direct correlation between education and the level of job training and the extent of the growth in the job categories," said Jothen. "I hate to say it but jobs that require very little if any post-high school formal training on average aren't going to produce as many opportunities."

Unskilled labourers will see the lowest growth in demand for their services, at an average of 0.8 per cent to 2011. Semi-skilled workers fare only slightly better with growth predicted at 0.9 per cent.

By comparison, the number of management jobs is expected to increase by 1.8 per cent over the same period; professional and administrative jobs will jump by 1.6 per cent and skilled and technical jobs will see a 1.4-per-cent increase.

Jacques Pelletier, executive director of the Canada Career Consortium, which has 100 member organizations involved in career development across Canada, said there are high school grads lacking competent literacy, numeracy and communications skills to even train for some jobs.

"If you have Grade 8 level reading and you work for example in refrigeration and you can't understand the language and can't calibrate because your math skills are Grade 7, 8 or 9 level -you won't get hired," he said.

Liberal MLA Richard Stewart, chair of the government's select standing committee on education and father of a 17-year-old who is graduating from high school, said his daughter shares the dilemma of many other students: not knowing which career direction to take.

"There are a lot of choices," he said. "But we have an education system that doesn't make those choices clear."

A system that steers students to universities leaves out many career possibilities, said Stewart.

"We are left with a bunch of children who are not prepared for the lives they will be leading," he said.

For young people trying to figure out where the jobs will be, the statistics and stories can be misleading. For example, the regular spring media coverage of teacher layoffs isn't encouraging for would-be teachers. And the

numbers that show only 3,000 new jobs will be created from kindergarten teachers all the way to university professors in this decade suggest this wouldn't be a good field to enter. However, teachers are aging fast, and more than 25,000 will retire over that time, considerably adding to the demand for teachers, college instructors and university professors.

Information technology is another area that lost popularity as a career choice in the wake of the dot.com meltdown, but long-term prospects for growth in that area are good. High-tech companies may have been laying off, but if you look around the average office, no one is dipping quill pens into ink wells or calculating with slide rules: Technology is a fact of running most businesses today. With that comes a demand for programmers, skilled technicians and other staff to support it.

"Technology-related areas have had a lot of negative publicity since 9/11 and since the dot.com meltdown, particularly with computer-related jobs, but the future is still very good for them," said Jothen. "People fail to realize that half, if not more than half, of all IT jobs exist outside of IT and other technology industries."

"You need programmers and managers in large construction companies, in forestry companies, in every industry."

Jothen points out the same is true for primary and manufacturing industries that are seeing an increased use of technology, leading to a demand for technologically savvy employees.

"When it comes to labouring jobs in the primary resource industries, regardless of the degree to which those industries grow, they are becoming increasingly mechanized," said Jothen.

High-school grads will still be able to find entry-level jobs, ranging from grocery clerks to security guards, but that entry level is far lower than for people who choose additional training or education.

"There are job prospects, but it is at the entry level," said Pelletier. "If you come out with a science degree, a math degree, or a computer degree your entry level will be different."

Jothen said age and stage of life are also factors to consider. A young person with no dependents and no mortgage to pay may be happy with a lower-paying unskilled or semi-skilled job.

"In terms of a person looking for what they want to do as a career, the only consideration isn't just where the jobs will be," said Jothen. "You also have to consider what kind of working conditions suit you, how important is money, how important is security of employment."

"It's also important what stage of life the person is - I'd give different advice to an 18-year-old than a 40-year-old."