

Foreign workers: We need them, they're out there, so let's get serious

BY STEPHEN CRYNE

Within the next 10 years, in virtually every profession and in every industry, access to skilled labour will be the number one challenge.

Why is this an issue? In Canada on average women give birth to only 1.4 babies. We are not alone. From Australia to Japan, virtually every modern economy, with the exception of the United States, is faced with declining birth rates. We are simply not able to replace the number of people exiting the workforce for the foreseeable future.

In Canada it was once thought that the "baby boom echo" would be sufficient to replace existing workers, but the evidence tells us that is not the case. According to noted demographic expert David Baxter of the Urban Futures Institute based in Vancouver, "there is no 'echo boom' to pour into the labour force and it is not possible to give birth to adults. Increased immigration and reduced emigration will be required if our labour force is to grow."

By 2011 it is expected that immigration will account for all growth in the Canadian workforce. While we may have enough home-grown labour to replace workers, we will have no additional capacity to support business expansion. At a time when Canada needs to expand its trade both domestically and globally this is not a good situation.

Immigration is only one part of a complex solution to the issue. Canada also needs to develop a better approach to its apprenticeship and training programs to address specific shortages. In addition to developing a more highly skilled workforce within Canada, attracting

immigrant workers with the necessary skills must become a priority. And employers must find better ways to boost the skills of those immigrants with training and job experience. A study by Statistics Canada found that 70 per cent of immigrants settling in 2000 and 2001 had trouble entering the workforce.

The federal government recently announced changes to Canada's immigration policies. Those changes will focus more on family reunification, bringing more parents and grandparents into Canada. While the humanitarian objectives of those changes are laudable, they will not address the

labour pool shortage.

Moreover, Canada's immigration system lacks co-ordination and integration. The federal government controls immigration and the provinces control the licensing and there are major differences between provinces and professions.

Relocation practices must be progressive and supportive to ensure that employees and recruits who are relocated to fill business needs can be focused on the job demands and not on problems caused by shortcomings in policy and benefits.

HR managers must also be thinking about developing pro-

grams that focus on integration of workers into the workforce. Such things as cultural and language training will be much in demand, not just for newcomers but also for existing staff to ensure smooth integration.

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■ A PLAN FOR RECOGNIZING FOREIGN CREDENTIALS

How about pan-Canadian standards, and let's include Europe and the United States

Part of the solution to future workforce shortages, says the Canadian Employee Relocation Council (CERC), lies in streamlining the recognition of credentials of foreign-trained workers.

Recently the CERC presented recommendations to that effect to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration during cross-country consultations on federal immigration policies.

The recommendations urged that:

- Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) refrain from pre-adjudging the issue of credential assessment at the immigration stage; and
- CIC should work with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and licensing and regulatory bodies, including stakeholders such as industry associations, toward a standardized, pan-Canadian model for the foreign professional

credential assessment process.

The assessment process recommended by CERC would include:

- an international database of comparable/equivalent degrees and professional credentials and minimum educational qualifications, experience and language proficiency standards;
- a resource database that identifies the requirements that can be satisfied overseas prior to immigration by the foreign professional, such as language testing, and clearly identifies the requirements that must be undertaken and satisfied in Canada;
- a joint strategy developed among HRSDC, regulatory bodies, industry and employer associations and large scale employers to initiate apprenticeship programs that provide an opportunity for foreign-trained professionals to fulfill the required Canadian work experience for licensing;

- implementation of professional mentoring programs to ensure the protection of the public and the competence levels to be achieved and maintained by foreign professionals;
- negotiation of bilateral agreements between professional regulatory bodies in Canada and overseas, and with the United States and the European Union in particular, which will lead to abbreviated credential recognition for professionals already accredited in those countries who are graduates of recognized educational institutions; and
- particular emphasis in negotiating bilateral agreements between regulatory bodies in different jurisdictions to achieve mutual credential recognition for professional occupations designated by the North American Free Trade Agreement, and expand the list of eligible occupations.