

ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE ADAMS

Beyond Borders



Companies are turning their sights
overseas in the hunt for skilled labour

BY DAVID DICENZO

Two years ago, carpenter Marc Brenner was listening to the radio in his hometown in Teutschal, Germany, when he heard an advertisement inviting skilled tradespeople to apply for jobs in Canada. Within weeks he had an interview lined up; four months later, he was starting fresh in Edmonton. Brenner did have some reservations about leaving home, but the young carpenter says he was ready for adventure. "I figured, why not?" he says. "But I spoke absolutely no English."

In Germany, the temperature never dips below -10°C, a far cry from Canada's mercurial depths. But Brenner takes it in stride. He's happier walking Edmonton's spacious streets under sunny skies.

"When I first arrived here I felt like everything was bigger, way bigger," he says. "Even products are bigger. There is a combination of nature and big cities. You have to drive hours to the next city. Back home, you could quickly drive from one city of five million people to another that has three million. In a four-hour drive, you're out of the country. I like the extra space, but I had to get used to it."

Brenner, who now works with Clark Builders, initially never left home without his dictionary. The first English words he learned, he says, were the bad ones. Though he originally planned to spend just one year abroad, Brenner has already been in Canada twice that long.

Electrician Jason Walker had different concerns when he was coming here to work with Unitech Electrical Contracting in Calgary. He had to consider the ramifications of moving his wife and two young sons over from England to Canada. He had wanted to come to this country for a long time. When he met Keith Brooke, operations manager of Unitech Electrical Contracting Inc., recruiting in England, he figured it was his chance.

"I wanted a different and better way of life," he says. "In London, there was this massive influx of people and it made the country overcrowded. There are 60 million people in such a small space. I came here and it felt like the UK did decades ago, when you could just leave your front door unlocked."

The two men are part of a potential solution to the 112,000 jobs available in Alberta in the past year, a figure that represents 6.2 per cent growth, or more than three times the national rate. The jobs are there; the problem is filling them. The labour shortage in Alberta has had a big impact on businesses. Keith Brooke says the combination of a multitude of projects in the works in Calgary and a labour shortage is ironic. "The good times have come back," says Brooke. "Yet we have no labour."

Brooke, who says there is a shortfall of 700 electricians in the province, grew tired of looking for workers in Canada to no avail. A light went on over his head one day when he was thinking of his native country

of England, where he completed his apprenticeship as an electrician over 30 years ago. He placed ads in British newspapers to gauge the level of interest and was deluged with responses. To his delight, many met the company criteria. Coram Construction district manager Kent Dietrick began looking overseas four years ago. Starting in 2004, the company recruited 25 workers from Germany over a span of eight months.

"We've advertised till the cows came home," says Dietrick. "Here, I could spend two or three thousand dollars for an ad that runs for two days and not get a single reply. You can't get what's not there."

But an employer is legally obliged to
Continued on page 38.

Workwest Chief Looks Within

Since launching their website in early 2006, Workwest has since had over 1.7 million hits to their Alberta-based job postings. As a platform for Alberta companies who want to reach people through the magic of the Internet, WorkWest President Ray Edwardson has an innovative approach to head-hunting.

Open Mind: What in your opinion is the least-known but best resource for finding workers from out of the province?

Ray Edwardson: *There is a lot going on in Ontario that people in Alberta aren't aware of. The unemployment rate there is 6.5 per cent, some communities have unemployment as high as 17 per cent. It's devastating and it's going to get worse. We're going to go back there and do a few more career caravans. It's a great opportunity for Alberta employers to meet with hundreds of people face to face and take a candidate pool to have people to choose from instead of hiring the first guy with a pulse.*

OM: What advice do you have for recruiting employees?

RE: *The traditional ways of seeking employees have changed. The days are gone when you can throw out a newspaper ad and get*

80 to 100 responses. You have to get outside the box. It doesn't matter what you are looking for, the likelihood is you will have to tap into the virtual market. In today's age of mass communication you can show employees what they are going to get into, show them what they will be doing.

OM: What strategies should employers utilize to deal with the labour shortage?

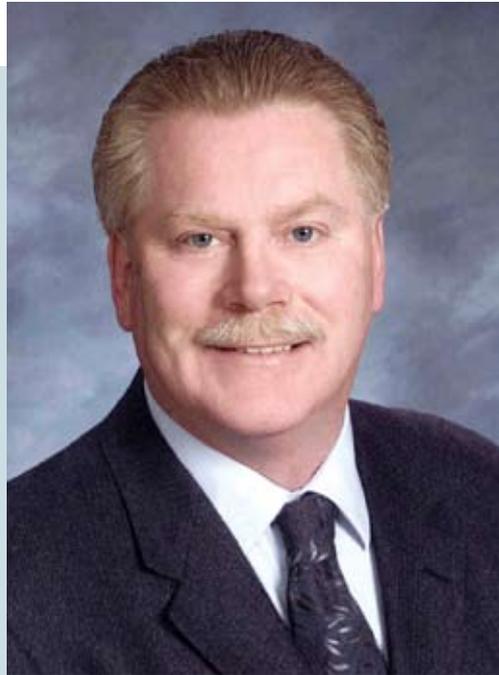
RE: *I read in a magazine that over 80 per cent of Canadian companies are facing limited productivity and efficiency related to labour shortages, but only 18 per cent say they have strategies in place to deal with it. That means that the vast majority of employers do not have a plan. Unless you have a plan, you are going to do a lot of knee jerk stuff and spend a lot of money, especially using traditional methods. You need to revisit strategy, do a bit of fishing, expand horizons, look at alternate resources and labour pools. It is a competitive advantage to get serious about revisiting your HR department, and seeing it as a marketing arm of what you do. It's not just about vacation time and benefits, but about taking a more active role in how you are searching for employees. Someone can look you up, and see what you offer.*

PCL's Dootson Speaks

When Roger Dootson, vice president and district manager of PCL Construction Management Inc., was looking abroad for sources of trained labour, he looked for a country with a strong apprenticeship program, a high unemployment rate and cultural and economic ties in Alberta. Germany was a natural choice. It fit all the requirements, and the well-established Young Workers Exchange Program facilitated worker attraction and fast-tracked the immigration process. But there were challenges; working with the government made it difficult to schedule new hires; job titles and experiences for cement finishers were different; getting past the language skills of applicants, and understanding the immigration system and its requirements. *Open Mind* asked Dootson what advice would he have for other employers considering hiring abroad?

Roger Dootson: "The first thing to do is get your new workers established in the community. Ensure everyone treats them as equals, because they are. We advertised through the International Employment Agency in Germany, and looked for people with a journeyman ticket and experience in heavy formwork and concrete work on major projects in Germany or Europe. Initially, we gathered resumes through the German government manpower centres and interviewed over the phone. The use of an immigration agency helped, as they would source potential workers in their job search. We went to job fairs in Germany to make the first contact. The in-person contacts were likely the most effective, as it has a more personal and real impact on the worker.

"In the beginning, people hesitated to accept foreign workers because they were worried about job security. After the first foreign workers were integrated, the attitude towards them changed. On the very first project, they filled journeymen positions and helped to maintain the overall project schedule. Initially, the Canadians were worried that



if things got slow, they would be laid off first. Once we told them that they were secure, they became more accepting. We also told them that we needed them to help bring these new people up to speed and we knew that it was causing more work and stress for them. However, we reminded them that everyone has an immigrant in their background and all that these people needed was a chance. We are very proud of the way the Canadian crews accepted and supported the new workers. Most of our foreign workers had a positive experience and are excellent ambassadors. They supplemented a very dear resource—skilled workers—that enabled us to complete our projects.

"As a rule of thumb, people need at least three months to get used to the different environment. You have to assign mentors to the foreign workers, help them get a social insurance number, accommodations, bank account, and health care. They have to be immersed in the culture. The immigrants who spent all of their time with Canadians assimilated quickly; those that grouped together had a harder time. You have to ensure they take English as a second language courses, get them settled in the community and comfortable with schools for their children, and touch base with them on a regular basis and get their feedback. The experience was definitely worth it."



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hire Canadians first. An employer has to have demonstrated that they have made an effort to recruit. If that proves unsuccessful, the employer has two options: go through Alberta's Provincial Nominee Program or the federal Temporary Foreign Worker Program. An employer must first apply for a labour market opinion with Human Resources and Social Development Canada. The application must meet certain criteria: the offer must be genuine, and a thorough search for Canadians must have been conducted. Once the paperwork is completed and employees are hired, the next challenge becomes integration. Before they ever set foot on a job site, there is a lengthy list of safety requirements, workplace logistics and social adjustments that need to be addressed.

"We take a look at what's missing in their skill set and try and fill in the gaps," says Sharon Blackwell of Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry. "We need to take the training of people from other countries and complement it with what they need to know to work in Canada."

Walker had been planning on relocating to Canada for years, but actually moving his family over here was challenging. Luckily, as soon as he set foot in Alberta, he was greeted by his new boss. "Keith met us at the airport," says Walker. "I didn't know his face but it was nice of him to be there when we arrived. He saw us to the house we were staying at and made sure that we were settled."

Brooke put the Walkers in touch with Canilink, a relocation company that helped the Walkers get a bank account, drivers' licenses and health care cards. The toughest part was living in a basement suite for the first seven weeks before they could move into a house. Walker's wife also found it hard to adjust, at first. With their two children in school and thanks to overtures from their new community, the transition is getting smoother. "We've only been here a few months but we're definitely happier," Walker says.

In Edmonton, Clark Builders looked to Pathfinder Consulting, an accredited immigration consultation company, to help integrate their five German-born employees. Pathfinder owner Tom Hess came to Canada from a small town north of Frankfurt more than three decades ago. He and his wife Carla help people from as far away as India make a smooth transition into Canadian life. Hess wants new immigrants to feel as comfortable as possible from the outset. His services include picking newcomers up from the airport; booking them a room at a hotel located right across the street from their office on Edmonton's south side; helping them register for social insurance and health cards; advising them on their choice of schools for their children; showing them where to take English classes and open bank accounts. The company even has a van with which to move furniture with. Hess also begins to introduce new arrivals to Canadian culture.

"People just don't know what to do when they come here," he says. "Our office looks like a travel agency. There are brochures from everywhere, so they can get away to Canmore or see the Dinosaur Park in Drumheller. The regular response from my customers is that they expected much more stress. We want to minimize that. If they get stressed, they might go home." Getting new workers up to speed on Canadian safety regulations is a chief concern. New workers

must take a Work-place Hazardous Materials Information System examination before they ever set foot on a site. Although electricity is the same everywhere, the terminology is different from country to country.

"Some small things are different, like the colour of cables," says Walker. "It's just a matter of thinking it through. As long as you're methodical in your approach, it isn't really an issue. It's just an everyday part of work."

While the technical component of getting a worker integrated is important, it is equally important to make sure you have your local workforce's cooperation and understanding. They have to understand that without the new labourers, the work will go away. Recruiting outside the country is a drastic measure that ultimately puts food on everyone's table. And the addition to the workplace is worth it.

"The workers from abroad have brought different experiences to the workforce," Gerald Clark says. "We've had some growing pains but we continue to add strength. We have a larger core of good workers who can only add in a positive way." 

Alberta Facts:

- As of December 2006, Alberta's unemployment rate was 3.3 per cent compared to 4.2 per cent one year ago. In the same period, 177,800 people were employed in construction, compared to 156,800 in December 2005.
- Canada's unemployment rate was 6.1 per cent in December 2006, whereas one year before it was 6.5 per cent.
- Increasingly, immigration will be a key source of Alberta's supply of skilled labour. If current levels of immigration rates continue, it is possible that immigration could account for virtually all net labour force growth by 2011.
- Alberta receives approximately seven per cent of all immigrants to Canada, even though it accounts for 10 per cent of Canada's population.

A Word from the Shop Floor

BY ADRIAN BOURNE

"Initially I emphasize that the relationship is a two-way street and that communication is key. A mentor relationship should not be based solely on dictating how a task should be done. The relationship is similar to an experienced supervisor and journeyman electrician; we quickly work out the areas that require little mentoring, and focus on areas that are new or different. I have to assess the new worker, make sure he or she has the skills and knowledge they claimed to have prior to being employed, educate them in our safety policy and procedures, and allow them to work at their qualified level once they have proven these abilities.

"It is important for the new worker to know their rights as an employee and that they are protected by Canadian law. I like to reinforce what the province has to offer in way of opportunities to create a good standard of living and a great lifestyle. There is likely a lot of apprehension on their choice to move to a new country, and they lack an immediate support structure from family and friends. You want them to appreciate that their decision to come to Canada was worth the stresses of relocating.

"The time frame of the working relationship is dependent on the mentor's ability to relate the methods, and the new employee's ability to relate that knowledge to the way the trade is practiced in Canada. So far, in my experience, that period is two to three months. The rewards for the company are an increase in qualified help to cope with the volume of work, and for the individual a quick and relatively complete transition to being a valued member of the team."

Adrian Bourne is a journeyman electrician and mentor of foreign workers for Unitech Electrical Contracting



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