

Sectoral changes, human resources, and the changing face of Alberta's economy

With Edmonton's skyline reaching new heights, its tried and tested economic failsafes are falling away. HR experts weigh in on where Edmonton's economy is heading, and how to find the perfect job in the new Alberta

By Zachary Edwards

In 2011, the City of Edmonton officially agreed to a funding framework for Rogers Place and kicked off Canada's largest mixed-use sports and entertainment district. Acquiring a classically Edmontonian nickname, ICE District, the area around the arena is undergoing a dramatic transformation. By the time it's finished, 10 hectares of land will be almost unrecognizable from what it is today, and Edmonton's skyline will reach new heights, both literally and figuratively.

ICE District can easily be seen as a metaphor for the rest of the city, province, and country – a small, localized example of the shift experienced by Alberta and Canada in general. As the buildings, condos, and theatres are built by well-paid, skilled labourers, they are set to be filled with low-wage, unskilled labourers operating in some of Canada's fastest growing industries: tourism, hospitality and service. This shift, while not finalized or inevitable, has been a general trend of Canada's labour force for the past few decades and has been a major focus for the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA).

In 2011, they released their CanadaWorks 2025 report, focusing on what Canada's job market will look like based on current economic factors. The report describes Canada's labour market in 2025 as "discouraging," pointing to shifts in economic sectors and the employer requirements that leave some trained workers falling behind.

HRPA's CEO, Bill Greenhalgh, has studied labour force changes in Canada for years and is unsurprised at Canada's shifting economy.

"In general, there's certainly a shift to service, a combination of food, tourism, those sorts of things," he says. "Natural resources is flat. Manufacturing in decline."

By contrast, Greenhalgh lists the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) industries as growing, especially the software industry, which has been moving into Canada and Edmonton, for the past number of years.

Greenhalgh is hesitant to call what Canada has experienced in the past five years a recession, calling it instead "a period of low growth." Ontario, for example, has experienced an uptick in the past few years just as Alberta has declined.

"It's like having one foot in boiling water and the other in cold water and overall being quite comfortable," he says. "What we're seeing is sectoral changes and employment reacting to those changes."

Julianna Cantwell, president of the Edmonton-based HR firm JUNA Consulting, says this hot-and-cold dynamic is true not just on a national level, but provincially as well.

"The oil and gas industry and the industries dependent on [oil and gas] have been hit hard," she says. "But other industries are actually growing."

She cites healthcare and nonprofit sectors as industries growing in Alberta, the result of grants and funding that “haven’t been cut” in the past few years. Still, finding the right people for the right jobs proves a challenge, either because of too many applicants or not enough properly-skilled workers.

“I have one colleague who posted a receptionist position and received 1,100 resumes,” Cantwell explains. “So in certain markets, we’re seeing an employer’s market...but there are still some employers who are still challenged in finding high-level, multiple skill sets positions. A person with a unique skill set and industry experience is hard to find.”

Part of the problems facing Alberta’s economy is its workforce, which is not properly equipped to deal with the province’s shifting economics. Workers coming out of secondary and post-secondary institutions do not have the skills employers in growing industries need. Greenhalgh argues that, while students haven’t changed their studies or focus in the past 20 years, the expectations of employers have changed dramatically. The result is a highly educated workforce with the wrong education or, as Greenhalgh puts it, “People without jobs and jobs without people.”

Despite STEM being a major growing industry, Greenhalgh says that “Maybe a quarter of people coming out of colleges and universities have the STEM degrees, which is where the jobs are.” The rest are in what is generally called the soft sciences and arts, which have a less direct education-to-job correlation.

The solution? Synergy and communication.

“The government needs to be more forthright and proactive in forecasting the kinds of jobs that are available to encourage people to move into those fields,” Greenhalgh says. “There needs to be a much closer link between government and companies and educational institutions. Educational institutions often think, ‘We educate people and then they get trained in the workforce.’ The workforce people think graduates should come out work ready. The whole area needs to be dealt with in a synergistic way. That’s what other countries are doing, especially in Scandinavia, and doing to great success.”

According to Greenhalgh, the trades are still an extremely good choice for many people, they just need to be willing to look to other provinces for possible work.

“If you want to be a plumber or get into a trade, there are plenty of apprenticeship opportunities, and they have longterm security,” he says.

Additional education for workers is simply not feasible for many people, but Cantwell argues there is still plenty of opportunity in Alberta. The trick, Cantwell says, is finding a new way to think about your existing skills and experience.

“One piece of advice I always give is to ‘keep an open mind’. Look at the combination of skills sets, what are you good at, and what you’re passionate about and be willing to think laterally. Think about how your skills and interests can be applied in a nonlinear way.”

Solutions in Canada may need to be more streamlined than training its students in trades and knowledge-based skills, and Greenhalgh recommends the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics streams for people looking to enter the workforce.

As Ice District starts to redefine Edmonton’s skyline, the city, and indeed, the country, we are at an important crossroads. With different sectors growing and shrinking, the trick will be to educate a

workforce that's ready for tomorrow's challenges. As for today, it may be time to put a more positive, lateral spin on your resume and start looking to those different sectors for new opportunities.