

What We Heard: Nelson & Area Interviews

Addressing Rural Labour Shortages

JUNE 20, 2023

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BACKGROUND

The goal of the Addressing Rural Labour Shortages project is to examine strategies to address workforce shortages in rural communities, with particular attention to attraction and retention. Nelson and Area is one of the project's case studies. As part of this research, we interviewed 9 representatives from support organizations and major employers, asking them about workforce development activities¹ and programs, needs, challenges, potential solutions, and more. This document summarizes their responses.

RESULTS

Workforce Development: Needs and Challenges

- **All interviewees felt workforce development is a high priority.** Most commented that it is not just because of the economic aspect, but that it is tied to our sense of well-being, and how we participate in and contribute to our communities. Interviewees noted a labor shortage has been looming since before the pandemic due to aging demographics and retirements.
- **The majority of the interviewees view workforce attraction and retention as a high priority.** Interviewees noted the need for retention and making the community attractive for people to continue to stay.
- **There are areas with skill gaps that require training.** Interviewees commented that making sure that local training institutions are able to provide really valuable training opportunities for community members at whatever level they need is important.
- In order of prominence, workforce challenges identified included:
 - **Housing** - There are job opportunities but there are issues with not enough houses for people to live in, as well as the affordability of housing, and of the type of housing.
 - **Pay** - Due to the economic environment, post pandemic challenges, and increased cost of living due to inflation, it is a challenge to meet the level of pay employees are looking for.
 - **Transportation** - Linked to housing issues, people who find housing outside of town requires them to commute. Some employees (or potential employees) don't have reliable transportation or transportation at times of day needed to work for certain employers.
 - **Childcare** - The lack of childcare makes it difficult for parents to work and there is a need for more childcare spaces so that people can get back into the workforce.
 - **Skills Training** - Lack of access to training to qualify for some jobs, as well as misalignment between the skills employers need and the skills of those looking for work.
 - **Immigration rules/policies** - The length of the Trades Programs are too short to qualify for a study permit and post graduate work permit, limiting appeal to international students.
 - **Mental health/ substance abuse** - There is a need to ensure that there are referrals to mental health or addiction services or community service organizations.

Sectors with Greatest Workforce Need

When asked which sectors have the greatest workforce need, interviewees identified three key sectors, each with a lack of workers, but for different reasons:

¹ Workforce Development was defined as any activities related to skills training, promoting career paths, matching job seekers to employers, attraction and retention, and other services related to workforce.

- **Hospitality/Tourism** - The starting salary is low, specifically in the hospitality industry. Interviewees noted that potential employees in this sector are able to leave the region and go to a big resort area for higher pay than what our local hotels are willing to provide.
- **Healthcare** – Staff are burning out due to a lack of healthcare workers. Pay structures for are complex due to industry standards, job responsibilities, and employee experience.
- **Construction** – It is difficult to find enough carpenters and other skilled trades specifically for the construction industry within the pay scale employers have set for workers.

Other sector experiencing challenges identified by interviewees included:

- **Retail** – Interviewees felt that the paid sick leave legislation in BC made it difficult financially for employers, which may have resulted in them hiring less staff.
- **Early Childhood Education** – Interviewees noted a need to train more people.
- **Forestry** – Impacts of climate change, a shift in consumer appetites, and shifts in provincial policy change, are changing what we can expect in terms of the number and types of jobs in this sector.

Workforce Development Supports and Programs

Organizations and their workforce development activities identified by interviewees included:

- **Community Futures** - During COVID-19 Community Futures worked with all of the businesses and provided guidance related to protocols. Interviewees also identified that their website has useful resources, that they have partnerships with other organizations, involvement in skills development and business startup program, and general advocacy as the voice of business for Nelson and Area.
- **Kootenay Career Development Society (WorkBC service provider for the region)** – Interviewees identified the sector specific employment programs they deliver (e.g., Retail, Accommodation, Food Services, Tourism) and services they provide for people looking for work, upskilling opportunities, job placement supports, and wage subsidy programs.
- **Selkirk College** - Attracts students by offering educational programs, and helps retain them by through Co-Op programs and making connections with local industries (e.g., hospitality sector).
- **Imagine Kootenay** - Program to attract investment and workforce to the region. Designed to try to attract people to relocate to the area and to purchase existing businesses. Interviewees felt it helps promote relocation of families to the area.
- **Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy** - Has settlement services that support retention.
- **Nelson Kootenay Lake Tourism** - Contributes to attraction by promoting and raising awareness of the region.

Based on their observations, interviewees felt that workforce development actions taken by Community Futures, Kootenay Career Development Society and Selkirk College were effective because their **contribution to skills training, job matching, and advocacy** is recognized by other non-profit organizations in terms of awareness and effectivity.

When interviewees were asked about workforce policy and program supports that are needed, their perceptions included:

- **Access to funding** for non-profit organizations that deliver workforce and related support programs.
- **More immigration pathways** for international workers, particularly in the Trades.
- **Childcare subsidies** targeting rural areas to increase availability of childcare.
- **Increasing availability of wage subsidy programs** which provide financial incentives for employers, attract talent, and help mitigate the challenges of recruitment and retention. For example, the Canadian Recovery Hiring Program was noted as a successful program.
- **Increase awareness of the BC Chamber of Commerce assistance programs** which can help alleviate workforce shortages by providing resources, guidance, and support to businesses in addressing their labor needs, fostering collaborations, and facilitating workforce development initiatives.

Workforce Development Opportunities

When asked about programs or supports that could improve workforce development, interviewees identified:

- **International Trades Pilot Program** provides an opportunity to fill Trades labour gaps.
- **Workshare program** sharing employees between businesses, providing stable, full-time work.
- **Ridesharing services** improving transit options through the use of individual vehicles.
- **Workforce attraction program** that promotes the unique advantages and benefits of working in the targeted area or sector and to create a positive image of the region and provide relevant resources to prospective employees considering relocation or job change.
- **Workforce housing programs** that create affordable housing options tailored to the income levels of workers, such as rental apartments or subsidized housing units.
- **Employee Recruitment Services (temporary or permanent)** through the establishment of recruitment agencies or services that specialize in connecting employers with candidates. These agencies may employ various strategies, including job matching, talent sourcing, and candidate screening, to ensure a more efficient and effective recruitment process.

SUMMARY

The majority of interviewees felt that workforce development is a high priority in Nelson and Area. Key challenges identified relate to housing, pay, transportation, childcare, skills training, immigration policies, and mental health/substance abuse. The three sectors interviewees felt have the greatest workforce needs are hospitality/tourism, healthcare, and construction. Lastly, interviewees also identified a range of existing and potential solutions that may help address workforce challenges.

THANK YOU

I wanted to take a moment to express my sincerest gratitude for the willingness of interviewees to volunteer their time and participate in the interview process. Their insights, experiences, and perspectives were invaluable in helping us gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. I appreciate the effort interviewees put into preparing for the interview and sharing their thoughts with us. We are grateful for their contribution.