

CLOSING THE SKILLS GAP

**A Report of the
British Columbia Chamber of Commerce
*Skill Shortages Initiative***

April 2002



BRITISH COLUMBIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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PREFACE

The challenge of ensuring British Columbia has a highly skilled and adaptable workforce is an economic imperative. While skill shortages have not yet reached a crisis proportion, time is running out for a comprehensive, collective response to this looming problem.

In 1994, the British Columbia Chamber of Commerce put forth its vision of BC Business in the landmark *Moving Forward* report. I call your attention to a quote in the report, which stated the following:

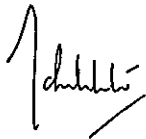
“...education must belong on the economic agenda not the social agenda. Education to develop our human resources is an indispensable investment for the future and is as important to economic development as financial capital and productive facilities.”¹

It has been seven years since the *Moving Forward* report, and skills issues have vaulted from being the fourth most pressing issue to number one. Unfortunately, BC as a province has not made progress on the skill shortage issue and BC is faced with an uncertain future unless something is done now.

The challenge put forth in this report is very clear: Leaders of BC must commit to action and change now, or BC's economy and society will suffer the consequences. Please take the time to review this report, its recommendations and proposed actions.

Leadership is needed to shift words and intentions into action and change. While this challenge is shared among stakeholders, the BC business community must take the lead.

On behalf of the BC Chamber of Commerce, I would like to thank Human Resources Development Canada and the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission for their financial support of this project; and the members of the Project Steering Committee and forum presenters and panelists for their participation in this project (see Appendix 1).



John R. Winter,
President
British Columbia Chamber of Commerce
April 5, 2002

¹BC Chamber of Commerce, *Moving Forward: The Vision of BC Business*, 1994.

SUMMARY

Leadership, Action and Change

In response to the challenges identified in this report, the BC Chamber of Commerce initiated the *Skill Shortages Initiative*. The Chamber is committed to leadership, action and fundamental change on the critical issue of skill shortages in British Columbia:

- 1. The BC Chamber and its affiliated organization, the Leadership and Management Development Council of BC, will meet with major media outlets to raise concern about the need for immediate action to prevent serious skill shortages and the resulting disruption to economic growth in BC.**
- 2. The BC Chamber will form a “Critical Skills Task Force” to develop an action plan and strategy for Chamber members and other businesses and associations to address the skills gap challenges.**
- 3. The BC Chamber will provide direct input to the Minister of Advanced Education on the development of a new industry training and apprenticeship system in BC.**
- 4. The BC Chamber will work with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce to spearhead leadership on this issue at the national level.**
- 5. The BC Chamber will work with key representatives of women, First Nations, immigrants and visible minorities, and people with disabilities to promote partnerships and effective utilization of BC’s human resources among local chambers and small and medium-sized businesses.**
- 6. In recognition of the provincial and regional economic development and employment potential, the BC Chamber will seek to initiate strategic partnerships and demonstration projects with First Nations and Aboriginal groups.**
- 7. The BC Chamber will work with key education groups such as parents’, educators’ and administrators’ associations to provide input, and develop partnerships for promoting trades and technical careers and industry training for small and medium-sized businesses. The Chamber will provide tools and information to local chambers to undertake such activities at the regional level.**
- 8. The BC Chamber will create a partnership with other groups to sponsor a “Small Business Recruitment, and Human Resource Development and Retention Tool Kit” for use by companies throughout BC.**

The Imperative

British Columbia is at a skills crossroads. The quality and creativity of the workforce has become the single most competitive factor in the industrialized nations. The degree to which skill shortages are averted by stakeholders will be a large determinant of BC's economic prosperity and social health. The BC business community in particular, can choose to take proactive action on this issue, or suffer the consequences.

All Canadian federal and provincial governments reflect the importance of "human capital" in their recent strategic plans and policy statements. The BC business community has increasingly raised concerns about skill shortages. However, concrete strategies need to be implemented in order to convert "words to deeds". Otherwise, BC and its businesses and workers will be marginal players in the global, knowledge-based economy.

There are indications that Canada is weak in this arena. Global indicators show BC and the rest of the country rank very low in, for example, retaining highly qualified workers, labour-management relations, and staff training. Notwithstanding September 11th and the recent economic downturn, skill shortages are not a passing "fad". As renowned educator Paul Gallagher and economist Roslyn Kunin have warned, skill shortages will threaten British Columbians' quality of life.

The BC Chamber of Commerce *Skill Shortages Initiative*

In light of its concern about ensuring a globally competitive economy and workforce, the BC Chamber of Commerce initiated a project summarized in this report. The *Skill Shortages Initiative* involved a survey of over 1,000 Chamber members, six regional forums, and the analysis and synthesis of several reports and studies. The purpose of this project was to engage business and community stakeholders on skill shortages challenges, to identify best practices and solutions for addressing it, and ultimately, to stimulate action.

The many small and medium-sized enterprises that participated, are very interested in the skill shortages issue, and most expect this to become a larger problem unless proactive measures that stimulate change are taken. These businesses and other community participants called for the BC Chamber and other business groups to play a leadership role to identify challenges, opportunities and solutions. The survey and forums also found that business and community leaders are calling for changes in the education system and for all stakeholders to work together. Lifelong learning, improving the image of non-university careers, improved literacy programs, and more workplace education were some of the themes from the Chamber forums. The consensus of the participants emphasized doing something now.

As well as outlining the challenges to addressing skill shortages, this paper provides recommendations for action from the BC Chamber and suggestions regarding tools and resources

for businesses to use in order to recruit, develop and retain skilled workers. These “best practice” profiles are provided throughout the paper.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Chamber survey and forums, along with a review of pertinent literature, identified a number of key challenges related to the skill shortage issue. In the case of each challenge, this report attempts to identify opportunities for leadership, action and change. The key challenges facing BC vis-à-vis the looming skills crisis include the following:

- **Demographic realities** – The impacts of the declining birthrates and of the aging of the BC population, and the need to better utilize existing and new talent pools.
- **Immigration** – The need for change in programs for new Canadians, and the effective and flexible assessment and recognition of their credentials and training.
- **Literacy** – The need to increase workplace literacy strategies.
- **Industry-based training and apprenticeship** – The need to develop a new, flexible industry training model in BC.
- **Attitudes** – The need to shift attitudes about non-university careers, while balancing education and training priorities across all types of post-secondary education.
- **Businesses’ commitment to invest in human capital** – The need to perceive training as an investment, and for businesses and educators to work together to address skill shortages.
- **Secondary and post-secondary education** – The need to revamp these systems should be a major priority for education leaders and government.
- **Information gaps** – Businesses need better information on training resources and skill shortages.
- **Adapting to Economic Transition** – Governments, industries, communities and educators need to develop and utilize more re-employment strategies to move unemployed workers into new jobs.
- **Strategic Workforce Planning** – Governments, industry sectors, employers, workers and educators all need to adhere to a more strategic perspective on human resource management and learning, and collectively to undertake innovative planning approaches.

While the BC Chamber learned about many shortcomings regarding how skill shortages are being addressed in BC, the project also yielded a number of best practices outlined throughout the report. These examples all demonstrated one thing in common: investment in human resource development and organizational change pay dividends; they all involved innovative, creative solutions to the skills challenge. The Chamber profiled these best practices to reinforce learning from success and adapting it to one’s company or industry.

Recommendations

Based on what it found from the survey and forums and other business groups, the Chamber offers 30 recommendations for addressing the skills gap. These recommendations are “opportunities” for action and the Chamber was careful to ensure that each recommendation identifies specific stakeholder sectors. Collectively, the recommendations reflect a shared responsibility among the skills constituencies: federal and provincial governments, business groups and employers, labour and employees, educators and trainers, and communities. Some of the key recommendations in this report are as follows:

- Business, government and community service groups should make it a top priority, and work together to develop partnerships and strategies to recruit and develop human resources from non-traditional sources of workers.
- Federal and provincial governments, professional and trade associations, educators, and immigrant service organizations should develop a fast-track foreign credential assessment and recognition service for immediate implementation in BC.
- Governments and educators should work with business groups to develop practical training and retention tools for smaller businesses with no such expertise or economies of scale.
- Governments should expand “welfare-to-work” training models using work-based training and industry groups to deliver it.
- In unionized environments, employers and unions should work together to develop innovative human resource management and training practices that respond to skill needs and do not overlap into collective bargaining.
- Business, labour, government and education should more aggressively champion and promote trades and technical careers and training among their constituents.
- The federal and provincial governments and business groups should conduct a feasibility study on the cost-benefit of a “human resource investment tax credit” program. Public policies and private practices should reflect the principle of “those who benefit from training, should pay for this investment”.
- The provincial government and post-secondary institutions should increase learning capacity through the use of internet-based training. If every full-time student enrolled in one internet-based course each term, it would increase access by twenty percent.
- The provincial government and education groups should encourage and stimulate public-private partnerships among post-secondary institutions (e.g. public institution-private institution, public institution-industry, etc.)—perhaps by offering financial incentives.
- The provincial government should facilitate the development of a provincial human resource development strategy, lead by the business community with input from labour, education and community groups.

- The provincial government should re-negotiate a new labour market development agreement with the federal government that reflects stronger employer and workforce roles in its planning and implementation.

This report culminates with the BC Chamber of Commerce's commitment to action on the skill shortages front.

*"If not now, when?
If not us, who?"*

Jimmy Pattison

1. THE IMPERATIVE

The start of the 21st century brings a mounting concern about the shortage of qualified skilled workers required for British Columbia to prosper and successfully compete in the global economy. Many Canadian and BC organizations have voiced this concern to the extent that some have referred to this situation as a "crisis". Human capital has become a number one concern among all industrialized nations.

Many provincial and national leadership groups have called for action to address skill shortages

- Bank of Canada.
- Business Council of BC.
- Canadian Federation of Independent Business.
- BC Federation of Labour.
- Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission.
- Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters.
- Human Resources Development Canada.
- Conference Board of Canada.
- Construction industry associations.
- BC-Yukon Building & Construction Trades Council.
- Tourism industry associations.
- Aerospace Industries Association of BC.
- Vancouver Board of Trade.
- And more.....

"The pending skill shortages, in almost every line of work, should be a high priority concern everywhere. It does not yet appear to be so, despite the overwhelming evidence in BC."

Paul Gallagher,
BC Chamber Skills
Forum Panelist,
October, 2001

Some BC industries, companies and economists are cynical about "skill shortages"—they have heard this before in the 80s and 90s. However, the BC Chamber of Commerce and other groups say that British Columbians and employers must take this issue seriously. It is a different world today because of global competition, demographic realities, and the increasing diffusion of information and communications technologies into our lives. As recently as the last few months, business groups have been raising this issue as a major concern.¹

This is not simply a health care phenomenon; or about teachers and highly qualified professionals. Without action, the skill shortage problem will affect every part of British Columbians' work and personal lives: Who will do the plumbing? Who will build or renovate your house? Who will build the new highways and bridges? Who will design and

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manufacture the new technologies? Who will repair your automobiles? Who will educate our children? Who will weld the oil and gas infrastructure?

The “new economy” reflects three key principles:

- A *global* economy—human resources, investment capital, integrated markets.
- A *knowledge-based* economy—knowledge, skills, ideas, creativity.
- An *innovative* economy—research, development, technology adoption and commercialization.²

In order for BC to prosper, its economy must strongly reflect these principles. However, in certain respects, BC's and Canada's economies do not.

As per the chart below, one of the key indicators of economic growth is new business investment in Canada by international corporations. In a recent survey of senior American executives, it was found that among nine factors, “work force” was the most important reason for investing in Canada.³ Also, Canada is ranked 36th out of 47 countries in its “ability to retain well-educated workers”,⁴ and ranks 14th in “extent of staff training” and 46th in “cooperation in labour-employer relations” out of 75 countries.⁵

The Canadian Human Resource Scorecard

| | |
|--|--|
| “Workforce” as a factor for investing in Canada by U.S. CEOs* | 1st out of 9 factors |
| Ability to retain well-educated workers** | 36th of 47 countries |
| Extent of staff training*** | 14th of 75 countries |
| Cooperation in labour-employer relations*** | 46th of 75 countries |

* Industry Canada, *Achieving Excellence: Investing in People, Knowledge and Opportunity*, February 2002, p. 55.

** IMD Switzerland, *2001 World Competitiveness Yearbook*, 2001.

*** World Economic Forum, *The Global Competitiveness Report: 2002, 2002*.

This report is about BC's competitiveness and about averting a crisis, by BC's business community and other stakeholders to ensure industries have world-class skills to grow and compete internationally.

The BC Chamber of Commerce and its partners began to recognize the skill shortage issue almost a decade ago. In 1994, the Chamber's *Moving Forward* report pointed out that a critical issue facing BC business was the lack of skilled workers and the need to upgrade education and training. Unfortunately, seven years later, the skill shortage challenge has become more acute due to the aging of BC's workforce, declining birthrates and global competition.

While the events of September 11th and the recent global economic downturn may have reduced the severity of some skill shortages, the BC Chamber of Commerce is concerned that once BC's economy turns around, the competition for talent will be even more severe than before. As David Baxter recently emphasized:

The result is that employers and employees, consumers and taxpayers must all prepare for economy wide labour supply challenges, and pronounced shortages in many sectors, in the medium and long term: the current slowdown in the global economy will simply permit near term postponement of dealing with some of these challenges.⁶

BC's economy and labour market are at a skills crossroads: Either drastic changes need to be implemented in the training, recruiting and retention of skilled workers; or we will face the consequences. It is time that BC business takes on this challenge in partnership with governments, workers and educators. The solutions will require bottom-up approaches in local communities and specific industry sectors.

2. THE BC CHAMBER OF COMMERCE SKILL SHORTAGES INITIATIVE

Impact of Skill Shortages on British Columbians

- Reduced productivity.
- Constricted company growth.
- Missed opportunities for labour force participants.
- Reduced provincial economic growth.
- Reduced investment attractiveness from outside BC.
- Reduced tax revenues.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly put into context the implications of the skill shortage issue and to focus on possible solutions. The BC Chamber of Commerce will also outline its intentions for working with partners to address this critical economic issue. The Chamber is issuing a call for action to institute real change in how business, government and educators address BC's need for skilled workers. As recently stated in its briefing to the Standing Committee on Education, "The BC Chamber is not laying blame on this issue. We are looking for solutions."⁷

~~The BC Chamber of Commerce highlighted the skills shortage issue in BC at its 2001 Annual General Meeting, by hosting a panel of experts to discuss various aspects of the issue. This forum heightened the Chamber membership's appetite for more information.~~

The Chamber, and many other business organizations, as well as agencies such as the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC) have attempted to raise awareness about skills and learning issues. As a result of the interest generated its AGM, the Chamber entered into a strategic partnership with ITAC to probe Chamber members' views on skill shortages and solutions. This partnership led to a multi-faceted project led by the BC Chamber between September 2001 and February 2002, culminating in this report and including the following components:

1. A survey targeted the BC Chamber's 27,000 member businesses—comprised largely of small and medium-sized enterprises—to solicit member companies' views on human resources needs and solutions.
2. Upon completion of the survey, a series of six regional "Surviving BC's Skills Crisis" forums were implemented in various regions to generate local, grassroots ideas for solutions and leadership. An important part of this process profiled local best practices in skill development and partnerships.
3. The project also involved a review of relevant reports and studies, and experts were interviewed to obtain a better understanding of the skills problem and possible solutions.

Based on this three-part approach, this report details various barriers that require resolution in order to effect change. The report also contains examples of BC best practices throughout its pages, which reflect successful models, partnerships and solutions.

3. THE BC CHAMBER OF COMMERCE *WORKPLACE SKILLS SURVEY*

The BC Chamber's *Workplace Skills Survey* was developed to provide a snapshot of its members' future skill requirements and how they plan to address them.

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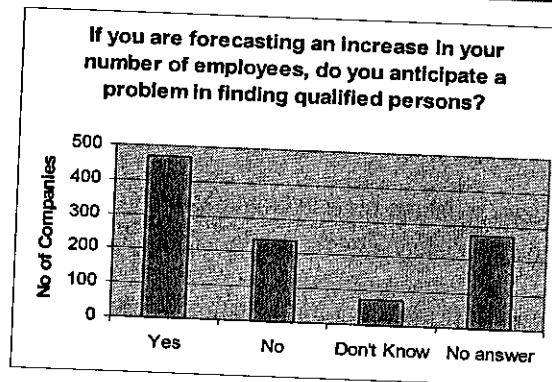
The survey was designed and tested by a Project Steering Committee (see Appendix 1) and implemented in August 2001. A total of 1069 responses were collected and analyzed. The BC Chamber received a broad-based response that reflected both regional and business-type diversity.

Sixty-seven percent of the survey respondents indicated that the BC Chamber should play a major role in the development of BC's skilled workforce. The respondents also indicated that the Chamber should act as a catalyst, facilitator and communicator for the continued development of the province's human resources.

Many respondents stated that they could not wait for government or education to "fix" the chronic and expanding skill shortages, and they "need help now". The survey also reflected a consensus that real change is required in how the education and training system responds to training needs and in how businesses address the skill shortage issue. Many businesses indicated they are already experiencing the effects of the skill crisis.

The survey confirmed that small and medium businesses throughout BC are experiencing difficulties in finding skilled workers and are concerned about the skill shortages issue, and included the following other findings:

BC Chamber Skills Survey



BC Chamber of Commerce, *Workplace Skills Survey*, September, 2001

- Almost three-quarters (74 percent) of those businesses surveyed expected to see an increase in employment in the future; 60 percent of these anticipate experiencing difficulty in finding qualified personnel.
- Businesses saw a need for educators and trainers to emphasize both soft and technical skills.

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- The responses reflected a call for business, government, education and labour to collaboratively work to address skill shortages and training needs. They identified education, business and government (in this order) as being most responsible for ensuring a continuous supply of qualified personnel.
- In terms of training existing employees, 44 percent of surveyed businesses are providing in-house continuous training and 25 percent are supporting external ad-hoc training.
- Responding businesses have implemented a variety of measures to ensure an adequate supply of skilled personnel for the future:
 - 18% are working with local schools and colleges;
 - 16% are working with their local industry association;
 - 15% are creating workplace incentive programs;
 - 11% are researching the problem.

4. THE BC CHAMBER OF COMMERCE SURVIVING BC'S SKILLS CRISIS FORUMS

The results of the *Workplace Skills Survey* were used by the Chamber to move forward with the delivery of six regional skills forums throughout the province to obtain more qualitative input and ideas for solutions regarding the skill shortages issue. The BC Chamber regional skills forums were held in Kelowna, Victoria, Nanaimo, Kamloops, Trail and Mackenzie.

These forums were designed to stimulate audience participation, as well as provide the participants with an opportunity to hear from expert panelists and keynote speakers and approximately one hour were dedicated to open discussion. The forums developed a high level of community awareness and were covered by local media.

All keynote and panel speakers provided remarks that resonated with forum participants and stimulated thought, dialogue and ideas for action and change:

- ‡ David Baxter of The Urban Futures Institute, provided startling evidence of the impact of the aging of BC's population, including its implications for the supply of skilled workers.
- ‡ Ed Wong of the Business Council of BC, spoke about the "third option" of non-university careers that young people and parents are not considering in sufficient numbers.
- ‡ Brian White of the Centre for Tourism Leadership, showed participants how the tourism industry needs a global approach to recruiting and retaining human resources.

- † Paul Gallagher of Gallagher and Associates, talked about the need for change and the imperative of new approaches to workplace training by employers, workers and educators.
- † Kerry Jochen of ITAC, provided an overview of how industry training and trades and technical careers must be promoted among employers and youth.

Forum participants urged the BC Chamber of Commerce to continue to spearhead a skill shortages initiative, and along with other business groups, to take action toward change around this critical topic. Some of the key themes from the forums were as follows:

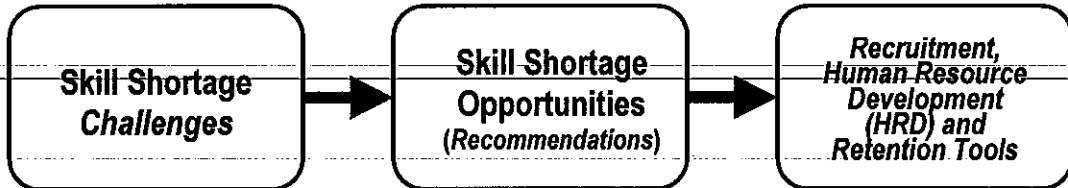
- Upgrading the skill sets of all workers to meet future skill needs is critical. Therefore, the working population should be encouraged to embrace lifelong learning.
- Lower skilled jobs are disappearing, as more jobs become knowledge-based, requiring stronger basic skills and education; literacy in the workforce needs to be expanded.
- Best practice examples of business training, and partnership success stories should be promoted and replicated.
- The current education and training system is not meeting the skill requirements of the labour market.
- The negative image of trades and other non-university careers held by parents and youth must be reversed.
- The province's businesses need a more flexible industry training and apprenticeship model.
- More workplace education should be delivered directly by Chamber members and other businesses, including mentorships, internships and other experiential learning models.
- Aboriginal and immigrant communities must be included in efforts to address future skill shortages.

Based on completed evaluation forms, the forum participants highly ranked both the speakers and the overall effectiveness of the forum.

5. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ADDRESSING SKILL SHORTAGES

Some key challenges emerge from a synthesis of what the BC Chamber of Commerce found from businesses and communities through its survey and forums, from a review of recent key reports and studies.

For each of the 10 challenges summarized in this section, corresponding opportunities are identified as "recommendations" by the BC Chamber of Commerce. Also, for each challenge, business tools for recruitment, human resource development (HRD) and retention are suggested. Each sub-section of this "Challenges/Opportunities" section will flow as follows:



One of the alarming findings from the BC Chamber survey, forums and review of literature is how widespread the skill shortage problem is in terms of existing and looming shortfalls of skilled workers in BC.

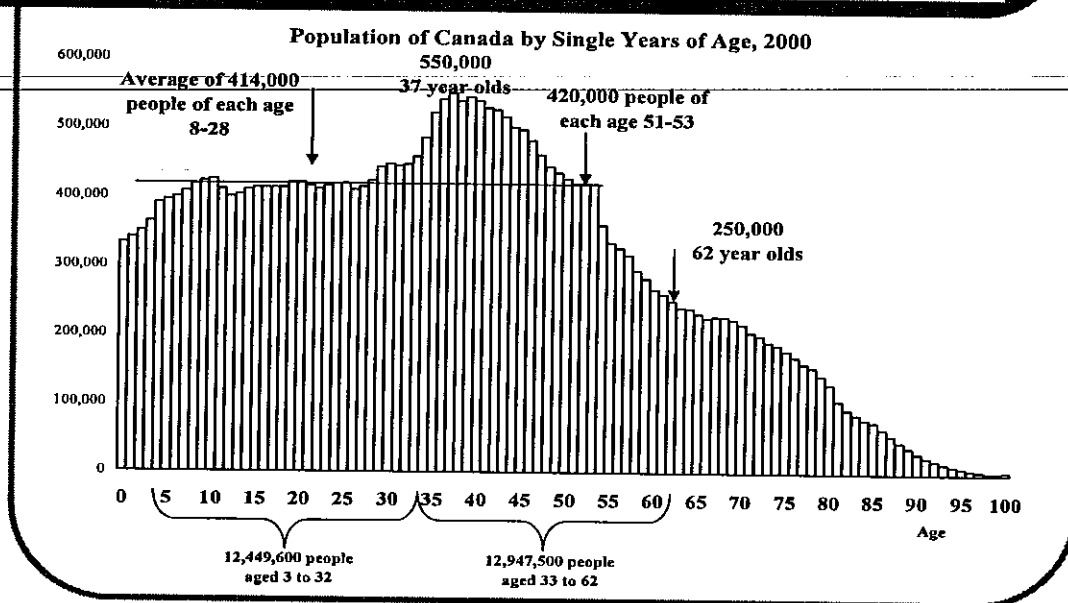
Skill shortages are widespread

- Engineers.
- Accountants & financial analysts.
- Computer programmers.
- Software engineers.
- All types of IT workers.
- Salespersons.
- Nurses, physicians and other health care professionals.
- University teachers and researchers.
- Insurance underwriters.
- Heavy equipment operators.
- Project managers.
- Industrial mechanics.
- Industrial electricians.
- Most construction trades.
- Automotive trades.
- Aerospace trades and technicians.

From Jock Finlayson, Will Labour Shortages Derail the BC Economy? February 2002.

5.1 The Demographic Realities

The “Demographic Wedge”



From David Baxter, *The Retiring Kind*, The Urban Futures Institute, Report #53, September 2001.

A significant factor in the skills challenge that BC faces is the the province's demographic profile. This is driven by both the increasing age of the baby boom cohort and the declining birthrate—neither of which can be controlled. David Baxter's chart above shows that Canada has more people in every age group 29-53 (i.e. part of the “demographic wedge”) than there are for the age group 8-28—meaning that “there are not enough young people in Canada to maintain the size or contributory capacity of the labour force after 2010”.⁸

Large numbers of workers will be leaving the workforce in the coming years. As they retire, the economy loses its “human capital” which generates a demand for new workers, particularly new labour force entrants in the 15 to 24 year old age group. Human Resources Development Canada predicts that 56 percent (383,000) of a total of 689,000 new job openings between 1998 and 2008 will be “replacement” jobs due to attrition.⁹ The balance of new openings is due to economic growth.

The effective utilization of British Columbians' skills will play a critical important role in the province's collective response to the skills crisis. The talent pool from which employers recruit, will need to include—more than in the past—young people, women, First Nations people, persons with disabilities, and other labour force groups. Collectively, these BC

citizens represent the majority of the province's labour force growth and future skills supply. This will help to ensure that BC's labour force stimulates and grows with the provincial economy. Immigrants, another key labour force group, are covered in the next section.

A recent newspaper story warned that, "A crisis looms if we do nothing to train and employ the 920,000 working-age Aboriginal Canadians who will enter the work force by 2006".¹⁰ The Aboriginal working-age population is growing three times faster than any other group in Canada. The story concluded with two choices: "We can accept the status quo and do nothing, or we can seize an unprecedented opportunity for both Aboriginal youth and corporate Canada". This is particularly important for British Columbia, given the province's large number of Aboriginal people and their drive for self-sufficiency and economic capacity-building.

While ten or twenty years ago, it may have been as a altruistic, community thing to do; however, it is now an economic imperative—businesses, unions and governments need to consider all sources of skilled workers and ensure the retention and development of human resources. There are private, public and voluntary resources for each of these talent sources.

The Under-Utilized Talent Pool

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Women</i> | While their labour force participation has increased, women are particularly under-represented in growing employment areas such as trades, technologies, self-employment and management. |
| <i>First Nations Peoples</i> | BC has the second largest Aboriginal population in Canada at over 139,000 people. This is the fastest growing segment of Canada's workforce (especially Aboriginal youth) at 920,000 workers by 2006. |
| <i>Immigrants and Visible Minorities</i> | New Canadians will contribute the majority of net new population growth in the next few decades—better recognition of their skills and credentials must be actioned. |
| <i>People with Disabilities</i> | The majority of Canadians with disabilities (90 per cent of those under 35) describe their conditions as mild to moderate; fewer than 20 per cent require any form of accommodation in the workplace. |
| <i>Displaced Workers</i> | The 45 to 64 year age cohort has been growing fast, yet there are few re-employment transition programs for the most skilled workers. |
| <i>Unemployed youth and Non-University Bound Students</i> | Tens of thousands of youth are on welfare and employment insurance. Eighty percent of BC's public funding is spent on learning for twenty percent of the population. More than half of new jobs will be in careers requiring formal post-school, non-university learning. |