

Energy, hope and optimism – but not enough workers

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Commentary

This summer is shaping up to be a period of great economic opportunity in our community. But mixed with that opportunity is a great deal of frustration.

For the first time in two and a half years, the Saint John region is hosting a full season of tourism, sports, and cultural activities. The resumption of cruise ship visits and marquee events like the Area 506 festival and the Memorial Cup taking place this week offer some of the hardest-hit sectors in our economy a chance to rebound from the hardship brought by the pandemic.

Businesses are eager to open their doors to more customers, and there is tremendous energy, hope and optimism in our region.

But there is still a significant obstacle to overcome: a province-wide labour shortage has left many businesses understaffed and unable to take full advantage of the season's emerging opportunities.

It is as though one cylinder in New Brunswick's economic engine has seized just as everyone is preparing to turn the corner.

Premier Blaine Higgs acknowledged the magnitude of ongoing labour force challenges in his speech to our Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce luncheon earlier this month. As of March, he said, there were nearly 16,000 employment vacancies in New Brunswick, or five per cent of all payroll jobs in the province.

At the same time, there were more than 63,000 people on the unemployment rolls, including 9,000 prospective workers under age 25. New Brunswick has the highest percentage of people under 25 accessing Employment Insurance benefits in Canada.

To illustrate the growing gap between employment needs and employment trends, the premier cited the example of a business that had shut down.

“Out of 59 employees that were fully qualified, laid off on Friday, and who could have gone to work on Monday at a new facility, at the same type of job, doing the same type of work, one showed up,” he said. “That’s just wrong, and we need a system that would guard against that and keep people working.”

Businesses are acutely aware of the systemic nature of the challenges they are facing, from employee recruitment to rising interest rates, energy prices and real estate costs. We need to pull together and approach these challenges as foundational economic issues that every citizen and level of government has an obligation to address. And we need to be aware that the hardest-hit sectors will need particular attention and flexibility from governments at all levels. As consumers, we can help by continuing to buy local. The hometown support that restaurants, bars and retail establishments have received throughout the pandemic has been invaluable. Continuing to support local businesses, events such as Memorial Cup games and Area 506 and new venues such as the portside Container Village will provide a baseline level of economic activity. And if there is a local business you really like, why not ask if they need extra staff? They're probably hiring.

The first line of defence in filling local jobs will always be hiring local people. But as thousands of businesses have found out this year, hiring locally is not always an option. The challenge of bolstering the labour force in these extraordinary times will fall to the federal and provincial governments. The government of New Brunswick could help by: providing more training opportunities for newcomers; focusing programming and policy development on the economic sectors that were affected most by the pandemic; helping businesses to innovate and automate; and advocating that the federal government increase the upper limits of New Brunswick's immigration programs; adjusting the rules for international students so they may participate more fully in the workforce.

The federal government must remove disincentives to work from the Employment Insurance program. As for those federal reforms, well – let's just say applying common sense would help. Should international students need to jump through a series of bureaucratic hoops before being permitted to work off campus? Should the Employment Insurance system be paying people not to work, when thousands of jobs are going unfilled?

New Brunswick businesses are ready to turn the corner on the pandemic and are more than capable of revving the economy into high gear again. People and governments just need to provide the spark that keeps the engine firing.