

Hot jobs in a cool market

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Maria Race V.P. of operations at Uduu, a high-tech company. Race is an example of someone who is constantly learning on the job and finds out what she needs to know to do her work. On the laptop and monitor are examples of a recent project the company completed.

Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

Maria Race learns all the time. If she doesn't know something, the answer is just a click away on the Internet.

The 28-year-old vice-president of operations for Victoria's Uduu, an online learning solutions company, Race is a long way from her 2003 UVic biochemistry degree. She manages contracts, projects and staff, deals with major accounts and governments, attends trade shows, and is involved with marketing and sales.

"Anything that I haven't known how to do, I just Google it and find out how to do it. It's a philosophy that we work by," Race says. "Learning has changed."

Race epitomizes the new worker. She's smart, self-directed, adaptable and has an entrepreneurial spirit. She's found her niche in the high-tech world, a sector that analysts predict will see continuing strong growth in the Capital Region.

As we brace for the next turn in today's financial troubles, the same pressures that created a tight labour market in recent years haven't changed. Our work force is getting older and retiring, and Canada's declining birthrate has analysts predicting we'll run short of new workers by the time the

economy recovers.

So what's going on? Are we running short of jobs or of workers?

The answer is both.

People who will survive in the workforce of the future must be adaptable like Race, know where the hot jobs are, and how to get them, experts say.

Labour market watchers say that project-by-project work might take the place of the traditional career jobs our society has been used to.

Canada lost a staggering 129,000 jobs in January when the unemployment rate rose to 7.2 per cent. Unemployment is climbing from coast to coast and Greater Victoria is not being spared, despite the strong presence of all levels of government. The capital region's unemployment rate moved to four per cent in January, up from 3.6 per cent in December. Still, Greater Victoria falls below the five per cent mark, which is normally considered to be full employment.

In recent weeks, Catalyst Paper announced it is shutting down its Crofton and Campbell River mills indefinitely and laying off more than 750 workers. That news follows earlier forest company layoffs as one of the Island's premier industries suffered more blows. Other sectors, such as retail and wholesale trade, and employers, including the B.C. Automobile Association, B.C. Ferries and A Channel, have also laid off staff. The cooling real estate market has put the brakes on several capital region condominium projects, the mainstay in recent years for construction workers.

But there are pockets where the employment picture is rosier. Scott Phillips, who founded StarFish Medical in 1999, predicts growth for his company over the next three to five years. Its 35 staff develop and manufacture medical devices for clients, mainly in the U.S., but also in Canada and around the globe.

"The U.S. and Canada have huge health-care expense issues so they need innovations to be able to find cost-savings," Phillips says.

About 70 jobs are posted on the Victoria Advanced Technology Council's website, a manageable situation compared with a year and a half ago when demand for workers far outstripped supply, says Dan Gunn, council executive director. "We had extensive recruiting, retention, and training and turnover costs."

When jobs are posted these days, the number and quality of applicants are both up, he says. "That is partly because the economy has cooled a little bit but it is also because there is less turnover within the sector itself."

As for what job will be the most in demand in the future, no one knows. "I think it is safe to say that whatever the hottest position will be in 10 years in the tech sector may not even exist today," he says.

Safe bets include those that require computer science and engineering degrees, because those graduates always find ways to adapt and be in demand, Gunn says. Business students with marketing,

communications, planning and leadership skills will also be wanted. The future needs people who are innovative thinkers, adaptable, self-directed -- remember Race? -- who are problem-solvers, can manage projects, and have strong communications skills, Gunn says.

Canada's aging population will create jobs in service-providing industries, where job growth is expected to outpace goods-producing industries, says a Canadian Labour Market Outlook report for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada covering 2006 to 2015.

Other hot job areas include computer system design, and health and professional services. Senior managers, human resources professionals, supervisors in trades, oil and gas drilling, and in processing are all expected to be in demand, the report says.

Closer to home, Greater Victoria's population is aging more rapidly than the province as a whole, contributing to a decline in labour force participation rates and difficulties finding high quality labour, says a new Regional Economic Analysis by Vancouver-based Vannstruth Consulting Group for the Vancouver Island Economic Alliance.

Most sectors are already facing labour shortages and these will likely get worse, says the February report. "It affects not just the workforce, but also business owners who want to retire and have no one to take over their business."

High-tech and professional, scientific and technical services are poised for fast growth on the Island, the report says. In the short-term at least, construction jobs will decline and the long-term trend in forestry will see further declines in jobs.

But Sasha Angus, economic development officer with the Greater Victoria Development Agency, says the capital region is somewhat insulated from recessionary forces thanks to the public sector presence here. "They have become sort of a cornerstone for our local retailers."

There's still a place for the traditional full-time job model in Greater Victoria, he says.

Previously announced federal contract shipyard work for construction and upgrades on ships requires skilled trades which "pay very, very well," Angus says. A major issue for the construction sector is keeping skilled trades workers in the community so they are available when residential and other projects start up as the economy improves.

The marine sector and high-tech are on long-term growth curves, he says.

Local high-tech businesses like Starfish Medical are "big enough to make a really significant economic contribution locally." High-tech also provides "well-paying, very much in demand jobs," Angus says.

His organization works with employers and educational institutions to marry studies with work opportunities to create local jobs. Angus is optimistic about the potential for environment sciences and engineering development in the field of renewable and clean technologies. Ideas can be incubated at UVic and then commercialized. "We are in the early stages of growth in that sector. I think there's a huge opportunity globally."

We hear a lot about the importance of work-life balance these days and there is a "huge resource" of these folks in the region, Angus says.

"There is a number of people who are consultants in town, who take on project-by-project jobs because they want to be their own boss, they want to run their own business the way they see fit, or they want to be able to take time off in the winter or what have you."

They work all over the world but call Victoria home because of its quality of life, he says.

As we look ahead to the future wondering what the job market will hold, Angus says, "People have to be a bit more flexible around how they work. But employers, because of our low unemployment rate, are having to be more flexible around what sort of work-life balance they offer their employees."

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