

SPECIAL REPORT

SMALL BUSINESS

WISE STRATEGIES FOR A HEALTHY FINANCIAL FUTURE

A CANWEST MEDIACORP SPECIAL REPORT

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“ (The worker shortage) issue has potential to stall the economy. It goes from the retail sector to health care and the oilpatch. It is the No. 1 issue of 2006. ”

HEATHER DOUGLAS, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE CALGARY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Boom spurs creative approach

ROB PETKAU
CALGARY HERALD

It's good to be a geek. Calgary's economy is red-hot, which makes the region a worker's market, where employers have to compete to woo their potential employees.

Just ask John Leishman, owner of the Geek Patrol, who offers extremely flexible work hours to recruit and retain staff.

"We've got about 20 technicians who log onto our schedule and book off whatever times they want to work, and we book up their schedule with appointments," says Leishman, who started the business about three years ago.

"They control their own schedules. One guy went on vacation for six or eight weeks, he came back, logged in and was back on the job."

He says the members of his geek army could likely make more money working elsewhere, so letting them set their own schedules and keep their own private clients is key.

But bending over backwards for your workers has predictable drawbacks. There's nothing to prevent all of them from taking the same time off.

"It's a huge nightmare sometimes, like around Christmas," Leishman says. "When there's not enough techs to cover demand, it means we lose business."

He says hanging onto valuable workers makes the headache worth it.

He also attributes his staff retention success to the type of work they do. These needs-for-hire could help an 87-year-old grandmother hook up a new printer one day, and perform advanced troubleshooting for a major company the next.

"A lot of them tell me they'd rather make less money and enjoy what they do."

Leishman acknowledges that this kind of scheduling probably wouldn't work for many types of businesses. But the key is to be innovative.

"You've got to be creative in how you're going to attract and retain them. What can you do that doesn't cost too much money?"

For Steven Rice, owner of A Sewing Sensation, the solution to his worker shortage is more straightforward. He stretched up his budget and offered more money.

"When Tim Hortons is paying \$9 an hour to serve coffee, you have to step up to the plate or you won't have staff," he says. "Our starting wages have increased, and we've instituted wage guarantees for commission sales staff. It's helping. We're hiring people now."

Hiking workers' starting wages is a tough step for a business to take, but for Rice, it's mitigated greatly by the fact his revenues are also on the rise.



Sewing Sensation owner Steven Rice resorted to offering more pay to secure his staff during the current economic boom in Calgary. Photos, Don Molynieux, for the Calgary Herald

"Last year was one of our best years ever," he says.

For his business—a nine-worker operation that sells and repairs sewing machines, fabric and related products—the worker shortage took hold in the summer of 2005.

"Everyone in the retail sector is screaming for staff."

Ironically, Calgary's Business Information Centre—a government-funded agency that helps entrepreneurs launch and grow their operations—is not immune to the worker shortage.

"We have faced it,

being a small not-for-profit (agency) with limited positional growth opportunities and salary range," says executive director Kristi Roskos.

"To address this, we have created a culture that supports staff's learning and development needs professionally and personally.

"We recognize that our staff is bright and ambitious and want to grow, so we help them enrich their resumes and experience for when they do move on."

While individual businesses are coming up with ways to address the worker shortage, things aren't looking up overall, says Heather Douglas, president and CEO of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce.

THE PLAN
The Calgary Chamber of Commerce is addressing the worker shortage on three fronts:
■ **YOUTH:** Encouraging young people to stay in school for future hiring.
■ **IMMIGRANTS:** Lobbying Ottawa to expedite immigrant hirings.
■ **ACCREDITATION:** Working to streamline accreditation process for tradespeople from other provinces.

Simply put, there's more work than workers, and this could knock the horns off the region's bullish outlook.

"This issue has the potential to stall the economy. It goes from the retail sector to health care and the oilpatch. This is our No. 1 issue of 2006."

Douglas says chamber members are tackling the worker shortage in a variety of ways, including hanging onto aging baby-boomers a little longer.

"There's a big bulge of recent retirees and people close to retirement, and many business owners are trying to discourage them from retiring or lure them back to mentor the new workers and young people. Maybe they're bored of golfing all the time," Douglas says.

Meanwhile, the chamber is tackling on the worker shortage issue on three fronts: encouraging young people to stay in school and get the credentials so valued by employers; lobbying the federal government to help remove red tape for immigrants who have jobs waiting for them; and working with the province and professional associations to streamline the accreditation process for profes-



Offering flexible work hours has helped recruit and retain staff at the Geek Patrol in Calgary, says owner, and 'chief executive geek' John Leishman.

sionals and tradespeople who've emigrated here from other provinces or countries. In addition, the cham-

ber is putting on a career show in the fall, to help put potential employers and staff members together.

Anticipating needs key to unlocking planning vision

VICKI CHARRON
CANWEST NEWS SERVICE
EDMONTON

Chris Vilecak's business offices are located only two blocks from those of his former employer, but Vilecak is the first to admit that his life today is light-years away from his existence as an Epcor employee.

His seven-year journey has taken him from corporate employee, to owner of a home-based business startup, to president and chief executive officer of Solution 105 Consulting Ltd., and winner of an Edmonton Chamber of Commerce 2005 Small Business Owner of the Year award.

To what does Vilecak credit his firm's success? A well-defined business plan? "I had one I guess, in my head."

Vision?

"I did not think we were going to be as big as we are."

So the key to their success?

"We've evolved as we've seen opportunities," says Vilecak. "I would say that has been one of our strengths, anticipating what's going to be needed."

A University of Alberta mechanical engineering graduate, Vilecak had risen within Epcor to the role of director of the utilities' key accounts group, overseeing more than \$120 million in annual sales.

At this point, a fortuitous combination of events took place—Vilecak enrolled in the university's MBA program and unearthed a personal entrepreneurial streak, just as energy deregulation appeared on Alberta's horizon.

Vilecak identified what he felt was an emerging niche market. In a much more complex environment of deregulation, businesses would be able to choose their supplier, negotiate their best price for electricity and natural gas, and would be challenged in new ways in energy-cost management.

He decided to scratch his entrepreneurial itch, and reposition himself in the industry as a consultant, one and half years before deregulation took effect on Jan. 1, 2001.

Early clients included MacEwan College (then Grant MacEwan Community College), and the CIBC Development Group.

In 2000, having moved to their offices in the Sun Life building, the fledgling firm added companies such as Canada Slewaway to its client roster.

But it was in October 2002, that Solution 105 made big news for itself and big savings for its clients. The company announced it had secured hundreds of thousands of dollars for clients, including the Capital Health Authority, the Oxford Properties, and West Edmonton Mall, from the provinces' utility companies by identifying billing errors, primarily in charges for power transmission and distribution.

"It's been an evolutionary ride," says Vilecak. "Initially, it was helping customers understand what deregulation was going to mean to them. Then it was a lot of the data analysis and modelling capabilities, to understand how they're using energy and what kind of contracts to get into, so we did a lot of procurement work."

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