

# Labour shortage fears put city in hunt for fresh blood

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Public service, says the City of Calgary's CEO, is a calling. But as the so-called war of talent escalates, the calling may be for more money.

One of the biggest challenges now facing city CEO Dale Stanway is how to use the sense of civic duty to attract and retain future employees as the public sector and private companies approach a labour shortage crisis.

The average age of a city employee is 45, and with retirement eligibility at age 55, many departments will be scrambling to find replacements -- some are already depleted and finding it difficult to attract new talent.

The city's planning department is in desperate need of skilled workers, while the police force is losing veteran officers to retirement faster than it can get new cops on the street.

The wave, according to research being done by the city's human resources experts, is expected to begin within the next two to five years and could reach crisis levels if strategies aren't developed to hire and retain skilled staff.

"We are going to experience the retirement surge before other local businesses," said human resources expert Lea Meadows, who is crunching the numbers to predict who of the 10,000 permanent employees is going to leave and when.

Meadows said the peak is 10 years away, but "will ratchet up every year" over the next decade.

The city is involved in a study with four large Alberta companies -- Canadian Pacific Railway, Nova Chemicals, Suncor Energy and Syncrude - - which collectively have 40,000 employees, to determine the face of the future workforce.

Human resources expert George Coppus, of CCS Insite, said a labour crisis is looming in Alberta because of the aging population and the surge in retirements that will occur starting in the next two years.

"We brought five large employers together who are a good representation of the Alberta situation, and what was a surprising finding

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was that even though the employers were very dissimilar, their workforces looked similar, in that they all have a significant under-representation of people below 35 years old," said Coppus.

"They also have a substantial over-representation of over-35-year-olds and a huge wave of people about to retire."

Coppus said the issue is complicated by the terrorist attacks and resulting economic downturn.

"With a bit of a recession, we're seeing organizations downsizing and many will start to believe this whole thing was a hoax. And what will happen sometime in the next three to five years, we will see a cyclical upturn in the economy at the same time structural issues will start to rear their heads," said Coppus.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which has 8,700 Alberta members, has also been tracking the labour shortage trends.

A recent survey of its members found 60 per cent already can't find qualified workers.

According to the federation, concern among private business about labour shortages has reached an all-time high in Alberta, Manitoba and Nova Scotia.

"My fear is that with the layoffs that have happened in large firms, and the worries about recession, skill shortage will start to slip from the public policy agenda," said the federation's Prairie region vice-president Dan Kelly.

"I worry that we're going to forget about this for a couple of years and the demographic reality is that the problem is going to get a lot worse before it gets better."

As for the public sector, Kelly said the city needs to find ways to attract and retain talent, and they can do that by raising wages for the high-level employees who, like CEO Stanway, could collect bigger bucks in the private sector.

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