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Businesses must hire young grads

By ROGER TAYLOR Business Columnist

IS THERE a disconnect between what people want to happen and what is actually going on in Nova Scotia?

In a speech to the Nova Scotia Chambers of Commerce in Halifax on Tuesday, Premier Darrell Dexter talked about a labour shortage coming our way. He said the labour force will shrink by about 18,500 people in four years, and by as much as 100,000 people over the next 20 years.

If that is true — and who can argue with statistics? — Dexter was understating the issue when he said it represents "a pretty significant challenge" that government and business need to start dealing with immediately.

As an example of what his government is doing to address the coming shortage of skilled workers, he reminded his audience of the NDP government's commitment to spend \$2 million this year to create an additional 250 openings for would-be students at the Nova Scotia Community College.

The community college already receives more applications than it can accommodate, and Dexter said expanding the number of available slots for students will allow NSCC to train more young people in trades and professions in high demand.

But that message doesn't seem to jibe with an email I received this week from a recent commerce graduate from a local university. I won't reveal his name, but he wrote that he finished at the top of his class and represented his school in various academic competitions, yet he cannot find a job in Halifax.

"Because of the current conditions of the financial sector, this may not be very surprising," he wrote.

"What is surprising is the fact that (I) cannot find employment of any kind; this includes applying to temp agencies, general labour openings, and even . . . as a dishwasher at a local grocer."

He said he's sick of hearing the same advice — "move to Toronto."

"If you are self-employed, there is something there for you. If you want to change careers, there is something there for you. If you have been laid off, there is something there for you. If you've recently graduated, have thousands of dollars of debt and are highly qualified to work, you are left to the dogs," the frustrated job hunter wrote.

He suggested a program to assist companies in training recent grads. It's something Dexter said he'd consider, when asked about it in a question and answer period Tuesday.

Cheryl Stewart, chairwoman of Fusion, says Halifax is still a very close-knit community, and that means it is essential to network and make contacts.

Fusion is an organization that aims to represent the 20-to-40 age group, and is helping to shape the future of Halifax.

While it's true Nova Scotia is going to need people to fill vacancies in the workforce, Stewart told me Tuesday the recession has caused many businesses to pause and rethink their hiring policies, at least until the economy shows real signs of improvement.

But demographics don't lie. The business community must change its mindset about hiring young people, said Stewart.

"(Employers) want to see that three-to-five years' experience on your resume before they want to take you on. . . . We've got to say, 'Look, investing in graduates on that front end, right when they're fresh out of university, is going to give us an opportunity in the long term to benefit our company and benefit the community. We've got to keep those people,' " she says.

(rtaylor@herald.ca)

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