



Chair's Column

The Telegram June 4, 2011

**The kids are alright**

**By Jo Mark Zurel**

You can't get a job without experience and you can't get experience without a job.

It's a mantra, a slogan even, for a generation of young job seekers.

Today, with youth unemployment rates soaring to nearly 14 per cent in Canada, it will be even harder for young people to get the jobs they need to build a life in their communities. Surprising, as we hear of worker shortages these days. It seems contradictory.

A report called Canada's Vital Signs 2009 found that even in the summer months when student jobs and temporary employment should be plentiful, unemployment levels for young people — between 15 and 24 — are hitting 30-year highs. Youth unemployment hit 16.3 per cent during the summer of 2009, the report says, with youth unemployment growing more than any other group.

A Globe and Mail opinion piece suggests that the recession will lead to a "lost generation" in many countries as youth unemployment rates peak at 21 per cent in the European Union, 20 per cent among recent college grads in Britain, and a staggering 51 per cent in my home country of South Africa. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, almost 90 per cent of unemployed workers are under 30. In the States, much of the work available to youth is in the form of temporary jobs.

The Globe's editorial cites the International Labour Organization which says in 2011, 78-million young people globally were without work last year – not counting the 1.7-million young people who have stopped looking for work.

If we're trying to transfer skills and knowledge to the generation that will be paying for and taking care of us in our expensive geriatric years, we're in big trouble.

It's frankly surprising that when we're staring down the barrel of huge labour shortages and trying to limit the impacts of the demographic time bomb in North America, young people throughout the world aren't employers' first choice when hiring. One has to ask who exactly will replace all those retiring workers?

But maybe these scary facts are a good thing for local business.

Instead of hiring older workers, who demand salaries and benefits scaled to their experience, or going global to headhunt, perhaps companies could consider younger workers.

At the Board we're encouraging business owners to hire youth, not just for summer jobs. To interview these students with the long-term in mind. Try and picture those students – looking at you across your boardroom tables at their fresh faces atop their brand new suits – 10 years down the road.

What kind of worker could they be? Could those young men and women be the next CEO of your company with the right mentoring and training?

Now ask yourself what they can bring to your workforce today? Do they have natural talent? Innovation and creativity? Passion and idealism? A fresh perspective?

Many young graduates and students are looking for a decent job with some stability and a reasonable salary to help pay down the massive university debt they're facing.

And we know that training, incentives and mentorship won't make up for an entry-level salary, but show those kids that there is a ladder and that they can climb it at your business and you might be surprised in their loyalty and work ethic.

Add to that the province's wage subsidy program, which covers 90 per cent of some new apprentices' wages and other programs like SWASP that help companies hire students for the summer, and there's no reason to not hire youth this year.

This province has a unique perspective on outmigration after years of workers leaving for greener pastures. In recent years the trend has begun to reverse. People are starting to see promise in Newfoundland and Labrador and are actually coming here looking for work. It's that shift in thinking we have to capitalize on when it comes to youth.

We have to allow them to go out into the world, look around, and realize there's nothing better than what we have to offer right here at home.

We can't do that without giving them a chance first.

So offer a job to a young worker this year. Hire someone who doesn't already have everything you need for the job. Hire someone with something to learn before someone else sees their value and hires them first.

They may surprise you.

Jo Mark Zurel is Chair of the St. John's Board of Trade