



Attracting Talent to Rural Workforces:

A white paper examining workforce development strategies in rural Ontario

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Abstract

Economic developers in rural communities are continually facing challenges attracting talent to their communities. Industries are looking for highly skilled workers that are traditionally attracted to urban cities. Some challenges facing rural communities are an ageing population, outmigration of youth and low education levels. While urban centers have turned to immigration as a talent attraction strategy, rural communities have failed to entice newcomers to leave the city limits. Rural communities must collaborate to develop stronger workforce development strategies. Strategies should be focused on a specific industry and should market local amenities to make communities so enticing the newcomers will never want to leave. Creating welcoming communities, increasing access to workforce training, and offering the necessary services for newcomers are some of the practices rural communities can undertake when developing a talent attraction strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

As Ontario's economy grows and prospers, unemployment rates are low and new jobs are created. At the same time, technological innovations have increased demands for highly skilled workers. Economic development professionals (EDPs) have been tasked with devising a workforce development strategy to increase labour force capacity. Workforce development is described by Jacobs and Hawley as a wide range of policies related to learning for work including training, education and skills development (2539-2538). The purpose of workforce development is to create a sustainable employment base that enables industries to prosper. A highly skilled workforce creates a competitive and prosperous economy by providing businesses with the necessary human capital to expand and flourish ("The Labour Market Shift", 10). Ontario's workforce is becoming better educated, better trained and harder working as the economy continues to grow. Industries looking to attract new talent and expand their operation now face challenges finding qualified available labourers. Whether it is through immigration or interregional migration, talent attraction is becoming vital to community economic sustainability. The purpose of this white paper is to examine the challenges and barriers rural municipalities face regarding talent attraction and discuss potential solutions EDPs can use to attract qualified workers to their communities.

BACKGROUND

Workforce Development in Rural Communities

As birthrates dwindle and the baby boomers grow closer to retirement, there is a growing need for Ontario's municipalities to attract newcomers. For rural communities, attracting skilled labourers means competing with urban centres. This is especially true for immigration. The business case for immigration is relatively straightforward. New Canadians can bring families and talent to areas that desperately need them (McGrath). Nowhere are they more necessary than rural

communities that have static and ageing populations. But with over two-thirds of Canada's immigrants choosing to settle in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Calgary, Ontario's rural municipalities are struggling to attract new Canadians that have the skills desired by their industries.

Rural Ontario's population decline has been most evident in adults aged 20-44. This has been the case in almost half of all non-metro regions in Ontario (Lauzon et al, 40). Retaining youth and young adults in the community has proven a challenge for rural municipalities. This lack of working-age adults has resulted in low unemployment rates, but not necessarily due to a growing economy (Lauzon et al, 40). Rural Ontario continues to be a strong hold for manufacturing jobs within the province with one-quarter of manufacturing sector jobs located in rural Ontario (Ibid). Depopulation has impacted the agricultural sector as the number of farms in Ontario has decreased due to consolidation (Lauzon et al, 41). Rural Ontario also is challenged in the quality of its workforce, as educational levels are lower in comparison to metropolitan areas (Lauzon et al, 42) A dwindling workforce with limited education, makes it difficult for employers to attract the talent they need to increase productivity.

To address these challenges, a multi-faceted approach to workforce development is necessary. Recruiting, attracting and retaining skilled labourers needs to be the focus going forward for rural Ontario. While skills development remains important, the industry has been reluctant to make the necessary investments. As only 25 percent of Ontarians participate in workforce training annually, rural communities must address the human capital deficit through talent attraction.

TALENT ATTRACTION IN RURAL ONTARIO

Rural communities face challenges of smaller talent pools and out-migration of residents to larger cities for greater opportunities. They attract from larger cities which means the candidate may need help to relocate (Agnew). There is tough competition for employers to acquire new recruits. Employers should understand the behaviour of potential recruits and design strategies accordingly (Dhawan). EDPs must balance connecting with the existing workforce with undertaking innovative initiatives to attract talent. Affordable housing, immigration services, education and training are factors to consider when developing a talent attraction strategy.

More cities, towns and regions are recognizing the need to be proactive in attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. Many are establishing workforce development strategies to address the high demand of skilled workers. Communities must highlight their benefits and opportunities to attract new residents and professionals. An excellent example of candidate attraction comes from Goderich, Ontario. Their doctor to population ratio was one to 444, as most doctors were choosing to practice in urban areas. The Town of Goderich recognized that doctors were not going to come to rural Ontario unless they had the same amenities as urban areas for them and their families (Ray). The community rallied together to raise six million dollars in addition to leveraging provincial and federal government programs to build a YMCA with an arena and a pool and to renovate the town's library. Once these amenities were available, they secured a clinic. A dedicated physician recruiter was hired to organize weekend retreats, Mayor's tours, real estate, match-making and babysitting services. This attraction initiative in conjunction with their economic development plan to become a specialized health care hub have proven successful (The Town of Goderich). The aim of these initiatives was to illustrate the benefits of the community, and the value of potential recruits' contribution if they would relocate to Goderich. This

aggressive approach to highlight the town's features and benefits may be used in other areas facing the similar challenges (Ray).

Available affordable housing is an important factor to consider when recruiting candidates. Industries, municipalities, and unions can collaborate to create affordable housing for tourism workers. A Whistler, British Columbia program matches property owners to business owners to provide workforce housing (“Rural Workforce Development Strategies”). Unite HERE, Toronto Community Housing and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto partnered to build an affordable housing building for hospitality workers and displaced residents in downtown Toronto. The facility also contains the Hospitality Workers Training Centre (“Rural Workforce Development Strategies”).

To respond to short-term regional labour market shortages, the Government of Canada has implemented initiatives to increase immigration (Ferrer). Skilled workers can apply to immigrate to Canada through Express Entry (“Immigrate as a skilled worker”). According to Professor Wayne Caldwell of the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph, “Doing nothing to attract newcomers is not a sustainable option, but there are also long-time frames associated with immigration strategies” (Shaer). He found the most successful communities work at creating connections between newcomers and established community members. Connections are formed by being open to new ideas and customs, and by celebrating diversity. For example, Wellington County has successfully attracted skilled immigrants to their communities to fill jobs through newcomer job fairs (Flanagan). They have identified that community support is necessary to integrate newcomers into the community. Support is offered in a wide range of venues such as, English language classes, cultural understanding, obtaining a driver’s license, and finding a doctor. According to

Tom Lusi of Wellington County, “We can now position ourselves as an alternative to bigger cities” (Flanagan).

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Scholars and practitioners alike have proposed many solutions to the challenges their communities have faced regarding workforce development. What is significant to note is that the success of workforce development programs is often dependent on its connection to other programs (Jacobs, Hawley, 2538). Solutions often involve a multi-faceted approach to workforce development that is unique to the needs of that area, but commonalities exist between potential solutions.

In the wake of various constraints imposed on municipalities through legislation, municipalities have found creative ways to enhance their economic growth and competitiveness. In this respect, the collaboration of municipalities has been important for creating tangible solutions.

This has been part of an effort by municipalities to create economies of scale (Arku, Oosterbaan, 367). A global marketplace has posed a challenge for municipalities who are small as they are unable to compete. Strength lies in numbers, and one strategy that many regions have found effective is developing joint workshops, job fairs, businesses and networking programs (Arku, Oosterbaan, 368). Taking a collaborative approach allows for municipalities to pool financial and administrative resources together to tackle workforce development. Often this is organized by the upper tier level of government. An example of the regional collaborative approach to immigration is the Atlantic Immigration Pilot. Designed to attract immigrants to Atlantic Canada, the Atlantic Immigration Pilot is a partnership between the Government of Canada and the four Atlantic provinces: New Brunswick Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova

Scotia and Prince Edward Island. It helps Atlantic employers hire qualified candidates for jobs they haven't been able to fill locally ("Hire a highly skilled worker or graduate"). Employers must be designated by the provincial government before they can make a job offer in one of the three programs available: Atlantic High-skilled Program, Atlantic Intermediate-skilled Program and Atlantic International Graduate Program.

Municipalities can also collaborate to promote their region. Promotional efforts leveraging senior government support can aid in attracting talent to the community (Arku, Oosterbaan, 369). The Harvard Business Review recommends that communities focus on leveraging a specific industry and targeting valuable employees in that sector. Investments should be made in non-traditional marketing such as social media marketing and digital media (Dhawan). EDPs should work with industries to establish the desired targets prior to embarking on a collaborative approach. The overall goal of these collaborative marketing strategies is to make the region so appealing to the target audience, they will not want to leave. Often this is done by first bringing recruits to tour the area.

Pro-active municipalities have also done long-term workforce and migration analysis to avoid the pitfalls of a weak labour force. The City of Kingston created a strategy to encourage immigration to the City in 2016. The strategy recommended that the City work alongside employers to offer the most appealing workplaces and develop competitive recruitment strategies to match employers to talent pools (City of Kingston, 2). The one-year update on the strategy found that the City had successfully partnered with educational institutions to retain the student population in Kingston through apprenticeships, internships and a recent graduate program. The one-year update recommended the City expand this effort further. Forming partnerships with educational institutions and identifying what barriers are preventing youth from engaging in the job market is one tactic municipalities can undertake to retain and attract talent to their communities.

Municipalities must promote their communities to potential workers. This includes leveraging assets such as affordable housing, access to services, and safety within their community. Strong leadership within the economic development department and a pro-business growth municipal council are two of the essential keys for a community to develop a strong integrated talent attraction strategy (Schaer). Communities need to undergo a service review to ensure the assets of their community match the desires of those they are trying to attract. Without a proper asset base, communities may fail to attract those they desperately need. Rural areas must leverage their low cost of living and sense of safety to potential residents while creating a welcoming environment for immigrants. Communities should stay proactively involved in their local immigration strategy.

CASE STUDIES

Eastern Ontario- The County of Hasting, The Town of Gananoque, The Township of Leeds and Thousand Islands.

Despite being near educational institutions and having many opportunities, the area has struggled to attract talent and retain youth, creating a talent attraction crisis. This has resulted in some industries, such as a medical device manufacturer in Gananoque, turn toward automation as they are unable to fill open positions. All of these areas have had to take innovative approaches to attracting talent to their communities to maintain a sustainable workforce population.

The Town of Gananoque and The Township of Leeds and Thousand Islands are both located less than an hour north of Kingston, Ontario. An ageing population and skills shortage has encouraged both municipalities to turn towards the City to attach students to come north. Leeds and Thousand Islands has recently launched a campaign titled “Try Leeds You Might Like It”. The economic development office and the recreation department have partnered together to launch this campaign specifically targeted at students. The municipality has also partnered with nearby

St. Lawrence College in Kingston to attract their students to the area. During the winter festival, the municipality brought culinary students from the college to the area. They got the opportunity to experience the municipality and interact with the community. While the community still faces challenges regarding transportation, its willingness to reach out to youth and get young people involved in the community is a promising strategy for both retention and talent attraction.

The Town of Gananoque is a growing community with a bustling tourism industry in the summer. In its quest to attract more high-tech industries, Gananoque has also begun to focus on its immigration strategy and presenting itself as friendly and welcoming to immigrants. The Town has begun to offer opportunities for newcomers to share their culture with those in the community. The local farmers market has given immigrants the opportunity to share their cuisine, and the Town has begun to market in Asian magazines to increase its international reach. But the Town continues to struggle to maintain a robust year-round workforce, as many workers only work seasonally in the area. Gananoque has begun to embark on new condo development to appeal to young people. Its local population, however, is not enough to sustain a large-scale condo development. The next challenge for the Town is attracting the educated population from Kingston. Working with large manufacturers in the area to attract educated talent will be crucial in the future.

Hasting County is located about an hour south of Kingston. The large County faces similar challenges to Leeds and Thousand Islands and Gananoque. They have recognized that rural Ontario is not particularly well understood, and newcomers are unaware of the benefits the rural areas can offer. The focus is now to promote rural Ontario as a place where housing is affordable, safety is a priority, and there is a unique way of life. Hasting County and the City of Belleville have partnered together to look outside of their community for opportunities. This led to a partnership between the area and the Peel Newcomers program out of Peel Region. Those willing

to seek opportunity outside of the City were brought to Hasting County and Belleville on a bus tour and given tours of five communities in the area. This initiative was successful in attracting newcomers. Promotion and marketing are key to attracting those who otherwise would not settle in the County. As communities prepare to become immigration ready, external partnerships between larger urban areas will be critical to promoting rural communities.

Southwestern and South Central – Bruce County, Huron County, Grey County

Southwestern and South-Central Ontario regions face similar workforce development issues. There is a lack of skilled labour force. Technical and soft skills such as critical thinking, conflict resolution, and customer service are needed to fill the available or soon to be available positions. It takes time to train subject matter experts (SMEs) in their fields. With the impending baby boomer retirement, time is of the essence. Communities need to identify where their greatest need is and focus on training programs to create hiring hubs. Employers need skilled workers but don't have the time to train them; they want work-ready people. Employer's strategies have to evolve to meet the needs of potential employees as part of their attraction strategies.

There are overlying challenges in attracting their workforce to support the industries with in these communities. Bruce Power in Bruce County will be hiring 3800 people between 2018 and 2035. They require skilled high-tech labour and construction trade workers that drain the apprenticeship resource pools that other industries in the area also draw on. Apprenticeship programs are losing people to Bruce Power. Youth migration, the ageing and decreasing population are also factors in workforce challenges in this area. Attraction and immigration strategies are necessary to address the needs of the communities.

Communities are undertaking creative initiatives to work with students in grade eight students to teach them about future career opportunities and gear their high school course selection in those directions. Grade eleven students have similar teachings about career ideas to assist in

their post-secondary program selections. Southcentral Ontario communities of Collingwood, Saugeen Shores, Bruce, Huron and Grey counties facilitated a bus tour where manufacturers and business owners travel outside communities to attract workers and investors to their communities. That initiative attracted 600 immigrants to the community. Local integration programs are already established to welcome newcomers. These initiatives require time, money and resource investments to continuously evolve to meet the changing needs of the community for economic development success of the community.

CONCLUSION

Attracting population to small rural communities can be a challenge as most people prefer to settle in larger cities where there are available large-scale amenities, existing cultural networks and a strong job market. However, rural communities can attract and retain population by promoting the benefits of living and working in smaller communities such as employment opportunities, lower living expenses, safe neighbourhoods and access to community services. An unskilled workforce, youth migration and decreasing population are human capital challenges in rural communities. Workforce development strategies must market communities as viable alternatives to urban centres by addressing service and amenity requirements. Based on our scholarly review and discussions with EDPs the following have been identified as best practices; affordable housing strategies, providing English language training, marketing communities as welcoming, promoting leisure attractions, and increasing access to essential services. In conjunction with collaborative intermunicipal partnerships, these practices create sustainable communities where you can work, play and raise a family.

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