

For Immediate Release

February 11th, 2009

Labour is a challenge in the tourism sector

With the Okanagan's thriving tourism industry, attracting and keeping labour is a challenge. This is the focus of a recent study released by the Okanagan Partnership, partnered with Okanagan College and Service Canada.

"Employers are finding it harder to attract and retain skilled employees," said Brad Clements of Okanagan Partnership. "The target age for workers in the tourism sector, of the ages 15 to 29, is decreasing, and is not projected to increase." Because of this, some companies have begun targeting other sources. Recently retired or semi-retired, recent immigrants, women returning to the workforce and foreign workers have all been identified as important sources of labour that were not a priority two years ago.

The study found that employers believe there are roles for government to play in providing more low-income housing, expanding the availability of rent subsidies and improving public transportation.

While not unique to the tourism sector, recommendations from the study include advocating for affordable housing and public transportation. "Many tourist jobs require transportation to get to them. The result is that potential employees are prevented from going to work for a tourism business because they can't live close by the place of employment, or they can't commute easily or cheaply." said Clements.

When asked about HR practices, the study found that community resources available are under-utilized. Only 21 percent of respondents said that someone from their organization had participated in HR training or development.

The Tourism Cluster is recognising that additional knowledge and strategies will be required to deal with HR challenges. "Because of the shortage of skilled labour, HR management will play a much larger role in the tourism sector, where historically is hasn't." said Clements. "The study shows that employers are looking at ways to find good workers."

"It used to be a higher end hotel in the South Okanagan would run an ad and get thirty to sixty applications. Now they are getting very few and resorting to targeting people from other organizations," said Clements.

The study shows that businesses in the tourism sector are finding they are having greater than 20 percent turnover in year-round and seasonal workers. “Now with the slow down in the economy the pool of available employees is growing due to the increase in unemployment. It was four percent at the start of summer and now it is six percent,” said Clements. “The challenge is that those people have come from manufacturing and construction jobs and there is a substantial wage difference between these industries and tourism.”

Wages however, are increasing in the tourism sector. The majority of respondents indicated that entry-level wages in the tourism cluster in the Okanagan are above BC’s minimum wage. The most common range is \$10 to \$12. Forty five percent of employers indicated that their wage rates are increasing faster than revenues.

The survey was conducted with businesses in the Okanagan Valley’s tourism industry. Information was gathered from employers, destination market operators and associations. Responses from the tourism operators throughout the Okanagan resulted in 236 completed surveys, a 28 percent response rate.

Recommendations by the Partnership include creating a feedback loop where information from visitors about their experience of the Okanagan can help businesses to continuously improve both products and service levels and to enhance operating margins. “Such information can then be used in hiring and training programs to ensure the labour force meets the demands of the tourists. Such a program will be crucial to long term success if the Okanagan wishes to remain a tourist destination,” said Clements.

“We hope that this study helps shed some light on the challenges the tourism industry is facing so that they can be addressed by streamlining, adapting and expanding existing programs to serve the sector better,” said Clements.

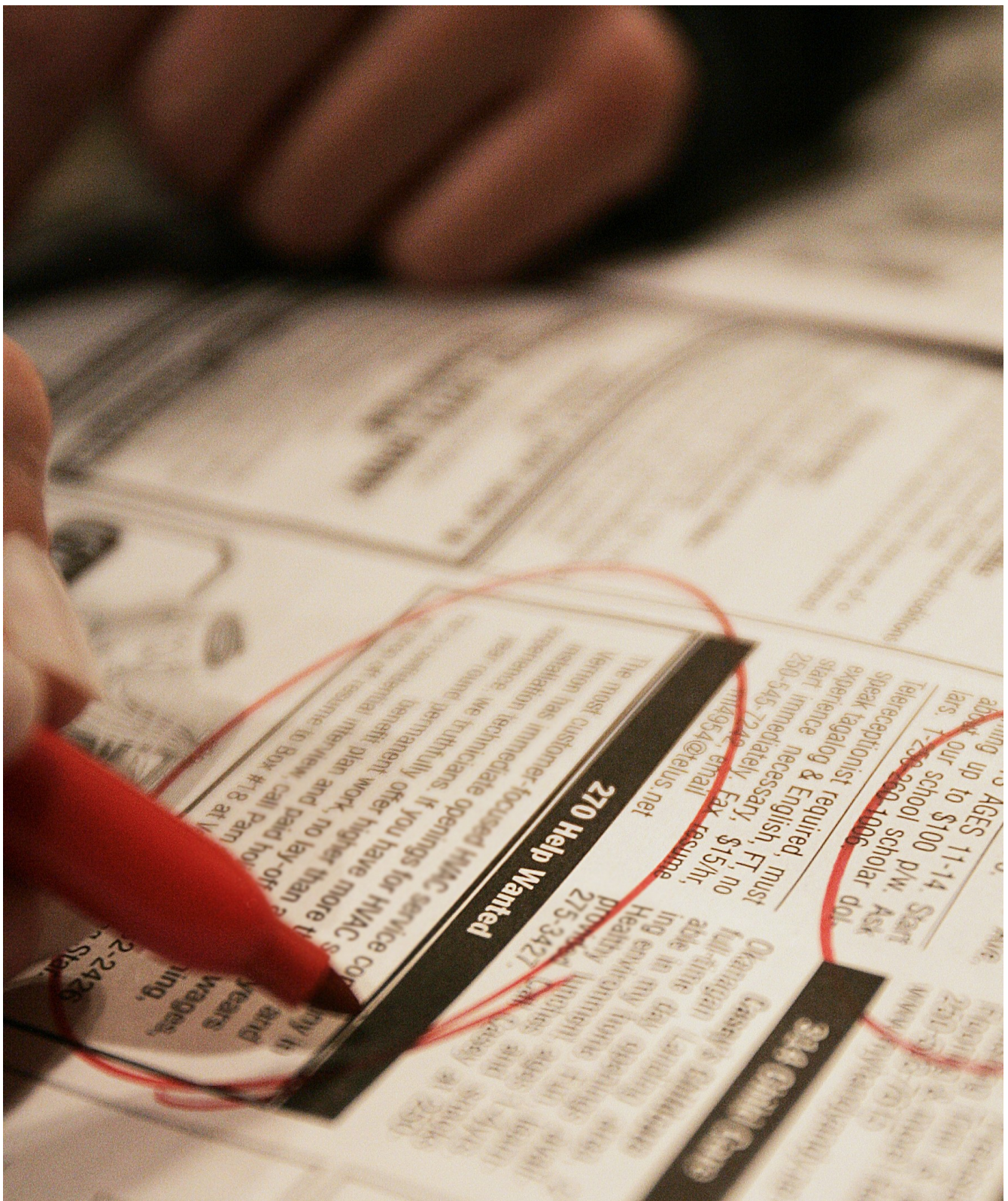
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