



DEMAND FOR SKILLED WORKERS INTENSIFIES IN CANADA'S ELECTRICITY INDUSTRY

Latest report from Electricity Sector Council calls for a coordinated effort of employers, educators, governments and unions.

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Today Canada's Electricity Sector Council (ESC) released its 2011 workforce planning report titled "Power in Motion", and the results confirm the findings of two earlier ESC reports: There is a severe skilled labour shortage and united action is needed to meet these unprecedented labour market challenges.

Built in the 1970s and 80s, Canada's "Legacy" electricity infrastructure has been eroded by time and technology and is now undergoing a major overhaul to "Next Generation" infrastructure. Over the next 20 years, government investment of almost 300 billion dollars will see much of the existing system replaced or upgraded, and a third of the generating capacity switch to renewable sources, particularly wind.

That's the good news. The challenge for electricity employers is finding the workforce to build and operate this new infrastructure.

Major investment in infrastructure requires equal investment in 45,000 new workers

While electrical utilities have over 100,000 employees coast to coast, they will need to recruit an additional 45,000 in the next five years. That's how many skilled workers, managers and supervisors it will take to refurbish the existing systems, build and operate the new infrastructure including renewable energy, and replace a wave of specialized and experienced workers who are beginning to retire.

Finding them won't be easy. That's why the Electricity Sector Council has been conducting intensive Labour Market Information (LMI) studies to track labour requirements and advise employers on how to meet them. This latest report provides insights from 89 employer organizations and 47 post-secondary institutions, covering 31 critical occupations (19 electricity-specific and 12 construction and related trades) in 140 labour markets across Canada.

"We are delighted to have such strong industry participation that ensures this supply/demand data is credible and current," says Michelle Branigan, Executive Director of ESC. "It's a real acknowledgement of the value that industry - both employers and educators - place on our workforce planning data."

Labour markets are getting tighter and the competition stiffer

Results in this 2011 report show that for many key occupations, the available workforce simply will not meet the unprecedented labour requirements. Employers will need to look for new recruits with new skills and occupations tied to very different technology and systems.

To make matters worse, other industries will be doing the same. All industries in Canada are experiencing a skilled labour shortage, and many are looking for engineers, technicians and technologists, information technology (IT) specialists and skilled tradespeople, particularly those with five or more years of experience. For example, employment for Information Systems Analysts is expected to grow almost 19% between 2011 and 2016, and over 25% of Power System Operators are due to retire by 2016.

Electricity employers are facing stiff competition, and according to ESC Board Chair Norm Fraser the only way to win is together.

United action is called for

"None of us can do this alone," says Norm Fraser, Chief Operating Officer, Distribution & Customer Service at Hydro Ottawa Limited. "There are going to be extraordinary hiring requirements over the next 5 years, and partnerships are key. We need to work together and with educators, governments and unions to raise awareness about the issues and find solutions."

Guiding that collaborative effort is the purpose of the 2011 "Power in Motion" report. It gives clear direction on the new skilled occupations the industry needs and where to find them. It even predicts when to find them, with a new LMI model that forecasts future labour market supply and demand for each of over 30 occupations over the next five years.

More importantly, the report recommends solutions on how to recruit for these occupations, with practical insights to guide human resources planning throughout the electricity sector.

Recommended strategies and insider insights

"Power in Motion" discusses, for instance, the need for employers to expand knowledge transfer programs to train and promote replacements for skilled retirees.

It talks about the need to work with provincial governments, colleges and universities to add new post-secondary programs, apprenticeship, certifications and internships for engineers, technicians, technologists and specialized trades (such as those involved in solar, wind turbine and geothermal systems).

It advises the need for carefully targeted co-op programs to recruit the new IT specialist graduates who will manage the increasingly complex grids systems as well as integrate and operate new, untested and large scale renewable energy systems.

Importantly, it also highlights the need to explore underemployed labour markets including immigrants and temporary foreign workers, women, Aboriginal workers and other diversity groups.

For those who read more closely, "Power in Motion" also reveals interesting did-you-knows. Like why the electricity sector's retirement losses are among the highest for any Canadian industry. Why its workforce lags behind other industries in proportion of diversity groups. What unions can do to make sure workforce resources are used more efficiently. And, how the industry can help remove a primary barrier to expanding college and university programs.

Electricity industry's HR advantages may tip the balance

"Canada's electricity industry has distinct recruitment and retention strategies to apply, and

unique advantages to offer potential workers," says Michelle Branigan. "Electricity employers are among the biggest and best known in many provinces, and can attract new workers with great career opportunities, benefits and long term job security. Renewable energy providers can promise green jobs and fast growth with rapidly changing technologies.

"And with a strong tradition of supporting licensing and certifications for specialized occupations, the electricity industry is well positioned to make a case for new investments in post secondary training and apprenticeship. In fact, this report can help by presenting evidence of the unique and potentially limiting impacts of skill shortages."

"The key is united action," says Norm Fraser. "Electricity sector employers share the same requirements for specialized skills and occupations. Acting together on initiatives that target these requirements will maximize the impact of limited resources, and capitalize on the potential of workers in all markets.

"Canada's electricity sector has power in numbers," says Norm. "It's time to put that power in motion."

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