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WORKPLACE

Job market demonstrates signs of cautious recovery: experts

Firms begin to look at 'strategic' hires as economy rebounds

BY DARAH HANSEN
VANCOUVER SUN

New data Thursday from Statistics Canada showed promising signs of economic recovery in British Columbia and across the country, but experts said the hard work of finding a job is not yet over for many in the job market.

"There's definitely an uptick in the market, but I would not say it is extraordinary in the sense that it's not a hot job market by any means," said Sandra Miles, president of Vancouver-based recruitment firm Miles Employment Group Ltd.

According to the government figures, B.C. has recorded three consecutive monthly declines in the number of people claiming Employment Insurance benefits in June, July and August.

Since peaking in June 2009, the number of EI beneficiaries in the province has fallen by 15,400 (16.4 per cent) to 78,800.

Nationally, 671,200 people received regular EI benefits in August, virtually unchanged from July.

However, the number has eased to levels recorded in March after rising slightly during the second quarter of the year.

Since the June 2009 peak, the number has fallen by 158,100 – enough to offset by half the 329,000 increase in EI beneficiaries recorded during the 2008-09 labour market downturn.

Miles agreed the market has improved for job seekers, but said employers, on the whole, remain cautious.

"There is not this wild hiring that was going on in 2006 or 2007," she said.

Jobs in mining, engineering, manufacturing and financial services are showing the greatest growth locally, Miles said, adding that a similar trend is beginning to emerge in other sectors.

"There are some very strong firms in Vancouver who walked through the recession and they are now starting to look at strategic hires," she said.

Miles said that more than ever, successful job seekers are being asked for "hybrid" skill sets as employers push for someone who can combine several jobs into one.

For example, she said a



Brittany Millman was hired as promotions manager at Granville Entertainment Group after a six-month job search, and now she's front and centre for the Cellar Nightclub in Vancouver.

customer service representative now may be expected to work in marketing as well as sales and revenue generation.

An executive assistant now might support three executives, rather than just one.

"Gone are the days that you can say, 'I will only do this and only earn \$80,000 or \$100,000.' Those days aren't around right now," Miles said.

Brittany Millman credits her dual background in communications and marketing for helping her land her job as promotions manager with the Granville Entertainment Group.

The 21-year-old was hired in September after pounding the

pavement for six months following her graduation from BCIT's radio broadcasting program. Millman said she knew competition would be fierce, but didn't expect the job search to be as difficult as it proved to be.

"I'm a real go-getter and when I am looking for a job, I really look for it," she said.

In the end, it was her ability to be flexible in her role that proved a winning asset.

Her new job blends two previously part-time positions into one: she is expected to promote the Cellar Nightclub and, in the evenings, manage the floor of the venue.

It's work, she said, that

builds on her previous work experience and schooling.

"That's what I was looking for, a job that could hone in on a few of the skills that I had plus learn more," she said.

Miles suggested job seekers can sharpen their resumes by focusing on previous key accomplishments.

Meanwhile, she said it's a good time for employers to hire good people.

"There is a lot of strong talent out there. ... If you grab some of those key people right now, you'll be positioned for the [labour market] upswing when it happens," she said.

dahansen@vancouver.sun.com

OPINION

Don't tinker with port tax – solution is to fix the system

Heavy-handed approach seen as unjustified

DON CAYO
VANCOUVER SUN



Every year, the eight regional municipalities that are home to Port Metro Vancouver facilities ask for several hundred thousand bucks, or even a few million, in lieu of property tax.

Every year they receive a lot less. Under law, it's the port, not the municipalities, that gets to decide how much it pays.

The numbers are big. The port paid only 44 per cent of the money demanded in 2008, a loss of more than \$5 million for the eight municipalities.

Meanwhile, the many leaseholders on port property – terminal operators and so on – do pay tax.

But they're protected by a cap imposed by the province in 2003. The province pays the municipalities some compensation intended to make up the difference, but not enough, in their view, to cover what they lose by being constrained in what they charge.

Not surprisingly, the municipalities don't like this state of affairs. So Metro Vancouver asked Enid Slack, an Ontario academic, to head a study looking into the fairness and effectiveness of these policies.

Her report has been circulating since spring, but it came into the news again (and I was finally moved to read it) in recent weeks as Metro Vancouver mayors begun grousing out loud about what they see as underpayments, and even threatening to sue the port.

The report is long and complex, but to sum it up briefly, it sees the cap as somewhat justified – even though there are probably better ways to deal with what it sees as not-very-widespread problems before the cap was imposed. And it sees the heavy-handed conduct of the port in setting its own tax bill as not justified at all.

I sort of agree. But I also think much of its prescription is wishy-washy, and it fails to focus on the nub of the issue.

It's hard not to share the report's view that port personnel shouldn't get to decide what they pay based "on a fictitious tax system they themselves have created arbitrarily."

But, for all the report's convoluted examination of how the

municipalities come up with their "official" tax rates, the simple truth is that their methodology is almost as absurd.

In a nutshell, I see the situation as one group, the municipalities, making up a high figure with no justification in logic or common sense, and the other group, the port, countering with a low figure that is equally unrooted in reality.

Turning to the other problem, the question of the cap, the report acknowledges a couple of key points. One is that, because port property can be put to only a very narrow range of uses and is hardly ever bought or sold, it is incredibly difficult to determine the fair market value, which is the usual basis for establishing property tax liability.

Also, though it found no evidence of municipalities deliberately shifting residents' tax burden onto port leaseholders, it concedes that this method of calculating the tax load can sometimes be unfair. Hence its tepid endorsement of the cap.

So, to me, the solution to both problems seems obvious. Fix the method of calculating the tax paid by leaseholders, then use the new, fairer method as the basis for the grant in lieu of taxes paid for the property that remains in public hands.

Slack and her co-commissioner note that they did not have a mandate to look at other taxation approaches, but they touch lightly – way too lightly, in my view – on a handful anyway. Specifically, they suggest taxing throughput, taxing revenue or gross receipts, imposing a business value-added tax.

"All of these taxes have the advantage that they do not directly tax investment expenditures," say the authors. "Revenues grow automatically with the growth in the economy, and municipal revenues would benefit directly from the economic activities of the port."

Which is exactly how any intelligent and fair taxation system should work.

In Wednesday's column on CIBC Visa moving into the debit-card field, I was wrong to say credit and debit functions will be combined on one card. The new debit cards will be separate pieces of plastic.

dcayo@vancouver.sun.com

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INSIDE | C3

Finding kids' sports bargains

It may take some sleuthing and searching, but the savings on used sports gear for kids can be worth the trouble. We have some tips and ideas to save money.



SATURDAY

Weekend Extra

The constitutional battle over prostitution is really a workplace issue for sex-trade workers like Susan Davis, who says she deserves a safe place to work.



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