

How to get oil and gas workers back on the job in 2017

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As Alberta says goodbye to another tough year – including a staggering year-end unemployment rate of 10.3 per cent in Calgary – one question weighs on many who are out of work: “When are the oil and gas jobs coming back?”

While some energy jobs lost during the past two and a half years of economic upheaval will eventually return, it is also possible that many of those sector-specific jobs will be gone for good.

Former oil and gas employees need to be prepared to take on new jobs beyond the industry.

These workers already have a variety of technical skills, and others such as project management, communication and problem solving, that are valuable in other sectors. But it's not always easy to identify those types of transferable skills and match them with other jobs. It's not just a problem in oil and gas – this is a challenge that employers in all industries across the country are facing.

Enter competency frameworks.

In two recent papers, the Canada West Foundation has championed the integration of competency frameworks into K-12 education and apprenticeships. It is time to develop and use a competency approach for all of our workforce development and deployment. Much of the rest of the world uses a competency-based approach, but Canada is just waking up to the major benefits this approach could bring. The next step will be to develop our own frameworks.

Competencies are what you need to know, do and understand to get a job done. While credentials, such as degrees and technical certificates, might capture what workers have been taught, competencies go much deeper: they capture what workers are actually capable of doing. Using competencies in building a résumé would help a job applicant identify some of the key skills many employers require. Workers are more than their last job description, and oil and gas workers have a diverse sets of skills – from

those who worked on the rigs, all the way to the top floors of Calgary and Edmonton office towers. But most workers are not aware just how competent they are, and this limits the range of jobs they believe they are suitable for.

In Alberta, using a competency approach would first allow oil and gas workers to know, and indicate, how competent they are in a variety of skill sets. Knowing what they can do is a major first step to figuring out what kind of jobs they are qualified for, and can successfully pursue, outside the energy industry.

We gain and lose skills all the time in our jobs. As Alberta's energy economy continues to transition, workers here need to escape the belief that their skills can't be used in other industries. New economic times demand adaptability, and knowing what skills someone is stronger and weaker in is critical to their success in new roles.

A second big benefit to a competency-driven work force is that it allows prospective employers to have a real understanding of the kind of work force they can tap into. When a prospective employer knows what a work force is capable of, the company can be assured its hiring demands will be sufficiently met. Demonstrating that we have a work force that has the skills, knowledge and abilities to fill a diverse set of jobs is a great tool to attract new businesses to Alberta across a wide range of industries. That's one of the great things about competency frameworks: their versatility cuts across all industries. We know that skills gained in the oil and gas sector can be applied across many different industries. A competency framework could bring this to life.

Despite continuing economic troubles, Alberta's hard workers remain a great asset. In 2017, let's resolve to help people recognize what they are capable of doing and becoming, and then better match them to their next jobs.

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