

HEADLINE: Round Table on Creating a More Efficient Labour Market in Canada Hosted by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards: Session 3 on Immigration and the Needs of the Labour Market

PRINCIPAL: Paul Swinwood, Executive Director, Software Human Resource Council

Moderator: So, moving right along, now into our next session on immigration and the needs of the labour market and we have again four lead speakers here and we're going to start with Paul Swinwood who's already been heard from. He's the Executive Director of the Software Human Resource Council. So Paul, I'd like to turn it over to you now for five to seven minutes, max.

Paul Swinwood: Will try, will try. I'd like to give a little bit of background. I've spent my life in the private sector. I've been about 41 years in the high tech community, building companies, building organizations. I have had probably well over 3,000 employees working for me at various assorted times and so therefore run into most of the challenges facing us in recruiting, retaining, finding, training and all of the other issues. My background gives me a little bit of an opinion since I've both developed and bankrupted companies over that time and it also gives me a different focus on it.

What I'm here to talk about today is one of the activities that my board of directors got me involved in. As we looked at the growth of our sector – and anecdotally – the sector is now approaching 800,000 workers and we're looking at about an 8 to 10% vacancy rate as you work through the issues. I won't put a number on that 8 to 10% vacancy rate because it includes churn and a few other things that are going on. But it is significant in a sector that's trying to grow about 30% a year.

Now one of the challenges we're looking at as the government has measured things is the telecom, I guess the information telecom sector is only one narrow portion of what we're looking at. And believe it or not, the largest employer of IT workers in Canada, is not Nortel, IBM, or HP, it's called the federal government of Canada. And so of course the people that we're looking for, the challenges that we're looking at are everywhere. One of the things we looked at was the temporary worker process, the ability to bring people in with the right education, the right experience, the right competencies, the right skills and the right tools. And we pulled together 50 companies who all got together and opened their kimonos and said this is what I'm looking for, even though it meant the competition knew what they were looking for. Welcome to some challenges we've had at the council. If you get Nortel, Mitel and Alcatel all in the same room saying this is what I'm looking for, a smart person knows exactly what it is they're developing next. We have some challenges.

Anyway, we then went out and did a 500-corporation validation of the seven streams that we'd identified as being in short supply. We worked on those streams, including education, experience, competencies, skills and tools, partnered with HRDC, Citizenship and Immigration and came up with a temporary worker pilot process that in about 20 months processes 4,000 workers into Canada through our stream. Fifty-five per cent of those were available for work in Canada within one week. The process can work. We also made sure that if it had anything to do with health or security that we did not short-circuit any of those processes. What we made sure of was that the company made the offer, the company took the risk and the company lived with the consequences so that a visa officer in some foreign mission overseas did not have to make a decision on those items. If a person shows up with an offer letter from a valid Canadian corporation identifying the education, the experience, the competency, the skills and the tools, we created a process that became approval rather than disapproval and it worked.

One of the persons we brought in to a small company here in Ottawa now has 69 employees from a company that started with one. They found this competency in Germany. They now have 69 Canadian employees working with them. We have another company that we were just at last week with a grand opening here in Canada, started out with two people. There'll be probably over 500 employees in that company. So looking at the temporary worker process and the industry validation, we've created a model that works in partnership with Citizen and Immigration and HRDC.

I can go down the other side of it and tell you all of the troubles and trials and all the challenges we've had, but I'll leave it at the positive side. It can work. If we look at – and this is what the recommendations are from my board – the free flow of knowledge workers into Canada, we can create Canada as a nation of choice for those looking to move. As I said to someone a little while ago, I'm probably the only one here that has been sworn at by the president of the Soviet Union. Stop stealing my good people. It was the only part of his speech that was in English and he looked me right in the eye as we were reviewing this process in Washington.

The recommendations from the expert panel don't go far enough when looking at the immigration process and the ability to attract people to Canada. One of our major challenges on the temporary worker process is the spousal work opportunity. I know it's there. Nobody knows how to make it work. And of course if we bring a family over, we have to send their teenaged children back home in the summertime so they can work at McDonald's in Paris, or wherever they came from. They can't work here. So there's a whole bunch of challenges around making Canada a nation of choice.

We have to have a policy change on attitude. Canada needs to attract immigration for us to continue to grow. The companies that we are working with are international and are global. Their employees work all around the world. We need to have that free flow of knowledge in a knowledge-based economy. Minister Stewart last night said 70% of the new workers were immigrants in the 1960s. I'm not sure where the data is for the 1980s and the 1990s. We're now part of a global economy. We have to make it easy for people to come to work in Canada and to want to come to work in Canada. So let's look at the policies. Let's look at the methodologies that will free up that flow of workers into Canada. Yes, we'll lose some. Yes, there's a brain drain. But let's make sure we put a policy in place that says it's easy to come here and let's make Canada the place people come for the high tech economy. We don't do that today. We make it difficult, we make it hard. We've shown a process. We've piloted it. It works. We're now in the process of making it permanent and trying to expand it. With that I'll stop.

Moderator: Thank you very much.