

# **Oddities in the Canadian labour force in the 21st Century: jobless Canadians in a labour shortage market**

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## **Introduction**

A paradox is a term that can be used to describe an economic climate where there are many unemployed persons and yet still a large influx of temporary foreign workers? This is the labour dynamics currently existing in Canada; growing numbers of unemployed persons in provinces where simultaneously thousands of temporary foreign workers are entering the labour market to fill job vacancies. Some researchers have rationalized that this phenomenon is caused by a skills mismatch – the imbalance between the skills employees possess and those skills required to perform a particular task or role in a job (Lundberg, 2007). The International Labour Organization (ILO) further expounds that skill mismatches can be found in environments where there is an increase in job vacancies, amidst an increasing unemployment rate in which workers lack the skills that the labour market demands (ILO, 2013). In Canada, there are numerous job openings in provinces plagued by high unemployment rates, and rising numbers of new labour market entrants in the form of temporary foreign workers. The first part of the research article will explore this paradoxical anomaly. The second part of the article will address the dilemma faced by Canadian policymakers. Do they reduce the number of temporary foreign workers and lose short term economic competitiveness to strengthen Canadian workers' skill sets? Or do they increase the number of temporary foreign workers and continue to boost short term economic competitiveness to the detriment of Canadian workers?

## **Labour Anomalies**

One way to validate the contradiction between the unemployment rate and the increase in temporary foreign workers is to examine the prevalence of job vacancies throughout Canada. Job vacancies are openings that have been vacant for a period of at least four months in which employers have been unsuccessful at finding suitable employees (CFIB 2013, 1). Statistics Canada (2013) uses the number of vacant positions divided by the total labour demand (number of occupied positions plus number of vacant positions) to calculate the job vacancy rate. There has been a steady increase in the job vacancy rate from 1.8% to 2.3% between 2009 and 2011 (CFIB 2013, 1). Although there was a decline in the number of vacant positions between June 2012 and June 2013, there were still 216,000

vacant positions within the period (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). As expected, the number of vacant positions varies by sector, size of enterprise and by province. The tendency is for smaller businesses to have more job vacancies than larger businesses (CFIB 2013, 2). This corresponds with the OECD findings that small and medium enterprises (SME) contribute to 60 to 70% of the job creation in OECD countries, of which Canada is a member (OECD). With Canada in the process of recovering from recession, large firms may be curtailing jobs and re-organizing to lower costs, and smaller firms may be expanding to take advantage of new market opportunities. The job vacancy rate for firms with less than 19 employees was 4.5% in 2013, whereas for firms with 500+ employees it was 1.6 % (CFIB 2013, 2). Similarly, sectors with a larger percentage of small firms had higher job vacancy rates such as personal services at 3.9% and construction at 3.5% in 2013 (CFIB 2013). Other sectors with high vacancy rates include hospitality, manufacturing, retail trade and health care (CFIB 2013, 3). At the opposite end, sectors experiencing slow growth and lower job vacancy rates include finance/insurance, real estate, arts/recreation, transportation and information/cultural industries (CFIB 2013, 3). A provincial comparison of job vacancy rates highlights provincial disparities. Provinces that have continued to expand economically have higher job vacancy rates. Therefore, the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta lead with 4.1% and 3.4% respectively (CFIB 2013, 3). The provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island have low job vacancy rates (CFIB 2013, 3). Job vacancies mean there are job opportunities for those who are actively seeking jobs. So exactly how many persons are looking for jobs in Canada?

The unemployment rate is the percentage of the labour force that is searching for a job. Typically to be considered unemployed, persons must be actively seeking a job in the current labour market. According to Benjamin Tal at CIBC World Markets, "Canada has an army of unemployed persons" (Grant 2013). In fact, in 2013, there was approximately 1.3 million persons unemployed representing an unemployment rate of 7.1% (Statistics Canada 2014). Severe job losses in the year did not help the unemployment figures. Job losses included 54,500 jobs in March, 39,000 jobs in July, and finally 46,000 jobs were cut in December 2013 (CBC 2014). These months depict the highest job losses for the year. The former Minister of Finance, Jim Flaherty, has attributed the job cuts to the fragile state of the economy (CBC 2014). Another possible reason could be the job cuts by major firms in Canada such as Blackberry and Sears Canada in an effort to restructure their operations. Whereas the majority of job vacancies have been concentrated in small enterprises, the contrary is true for job losses. Large firms have been playing a vital role in the increase of unemployed persons in the labour force. For instance, the public sector, which is a large

employer, shed 23,000 jobs alone in July 2013 of the total 39,000 jobs that were lost (Tal 2013). For unemployment data to be useful, it is important to estimate how many unemployed persons are available to fill existing job vacancies. The unemployment-to-vacancy ratio is the total number of unemployed persons divided by the number of vacant positions (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). The figure tells the number of unemployed persons available to fill one vacant position. By June 2013, the unemployment-to-vacancy ratio was 6.3, an increase of 1.1 from June 2012 (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). It means that for every vacant position, there was on average 6 persons available to fill that position in 2013, evidence that there were more unemployed persons available to fill job vacancies in 2013 than in 2012. Yet still, these unemployed persons were unable to secure a job by the end of 2013 considering the abundance of job opportunities in the labour market. Does it then signal that unemployed persons lack the skills necessary to fill the positions? A closer examination of the unemployment-to-vacancy ratio for the different sectors reveals that in sectors with high job vacancies, there is a corresponding high unemployment-to-vacancy ratio. For example, in the construction sector, which had the second largest job vacancy rate, the unemployment-to-vacancy job ratio was 8.0 (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). Also, the manufacturing sector, which had ranked in the top five for high job vacancy rates, had an unemployment-to-vacancy ratio of 5.7 (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). This suggests that there is certainly sufficient numbers of unemployed persons within the sector that are accessible to job vacancies.

So why is there this persistent cry of labour shortage? It appears to be a paradoxical anomaly – high unemployment figures in sectors where unemployed persons are available to fill numerous job openings. Upon examination of the unemployment-to-vacancy ratios, the only exceptions are the health sector at 1.3 and hospitality sector at 2.8 (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). This suggests that there is almost a 1 to 1 ratio, with each job opening having at least 1 person to fill it. In fact, this health sector ratio is the lowest unemployment-to-vacancy ratio in Canada in 2013. It signals that the health sector is suffering from labour shortage because as the demand for health care services increases, there are fewer available unemployed persons are present to fill vacant positions. Similarly, in the hospitality sector, the ratio of 2.8 also indicates limited labour supply to meet labour demands. Labour shortages prevail for these two sectors. But what about the other sectors such as constructions and manufacturing where it is clear that a labour surplus persists? Could it be that labour shortages exist not by sector, but by geography?

At this juncture, unemployment will be looked at from a different perspective by comparing the unemployment-to-vacancy ratios by province. Saskatchewan with its recent high economic growth has an unemployment-to-vacancy ratio of 2.6 (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). It signifies that on average 2 unemployed persons are accessible to fill vacancies, which implies that there is a labour shortage in Saskatchewan. With the continued economic growth of the province, labour demand would increase significantly ahead of the labour supply. Likewise, Alberta has an unemployment-to-vacancy ratio of 2.4 (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). In the last ten years, the expansion of the construction sector and oil and gas industries, have propelled Alberta's economy. Thus, it is not surprising that the province is experiencing labour shortages. Hence these provinces are hungry for the type of skilled workers which are lacking in Canada (Goodman 2013a, 2013b). So it is evident that there are provincial labour shortages issues whereby the number of unemployed cannot meet the labour demands of the market. However, what about the provinces where there are no labour shortages, in fact, a labour surplus, and yet still cries of labour shortages? Take for instance, these following provinces which have high unemployment-to-vacancy ratios: New Brunswick 10.1, Nova Scotia 9.8, Ontario 8.6 and Quebec 8.2 (Statistics Canada 2013, 2014). Such ratios paint a picture of labour surplus. It can be asserted that it is another strange phenomenon.

Perhaps the situation stems from regional differences in unemployment. Regional mismatch occurs when unemployed persons seeking work are located in different provinces from firms offering jobs (TD Economics 2013a, 2013b). Internal migration can aid western provinces with low unemployment rates. The problem is that interprovincial migration has been stagnant over the last years, for instance, in 2012 it stood at 1% (TD Economics 2013a, 2013b). Persons located in provinces with high unemployment rates who possess the skills for available jobs in other provinces may be unwilling to move because of family commitments, moving costs, regional differences in occupational regulations, or health reasons. Yet in 2013, there were sudden changes to the status of interprovincial migration. A report by the Bank of Montreal states that 50,000 persons, of which 11,000 came from the Atlantic Provinces, moved within provinces, with Alberta and Saskatchewan being the most popular provinces of choice (Evans 2013). The high level of interprovincial movement can be attributed to joblessness in Atlantic provinces along with low tax burdens and housing affordability in western provinces (Evans 2013). The only fear could be that interprovincial migration could deplete human resources in eastern Canada in an effort to lessen on labour shortages in western Canada.

## Labour Dilemmas

The increased popularity in the use of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) can be considered an enigma in light of the labour surplus in Canada. Originally the intention of the federal government was to utilize the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) as a main tool to alleviate employers' inability to find qualified Canadian workers by allowing the use of a labour source that would meet their labour skill requirements (Fudge and MacPhail 2009, 9). While employers in provinces with genuine labour shortages such as Saskatchewan and Alberta have benefitted immensely from the program initiative, employers in other provinces have exploited it. A good example of such exploitation is in the province of Ontario where there were 573,500 unemployed persons in 2012 contributing to an unemployment rate of 7.8% (LMI Division 2012). The Ontario Federation of Labour reports that "In 2012, the Ontario economy gained only 52,400 net new jobs, but 71,233 temporary foreign workers arrived in the province" (2013, 7). This data was validated from Citizenship and Immigration Canada Total Entries of Temporary Foreign workers by province or territory and urban area 2008- 2012 and the Labour Market Bulletin Ontario 2012 (Annual edition). It is a chronic situation in Ontario and concerns have been raised about the drastic numbers of temporary foreign workers arriving in the province annually amidst little or no improvements in the unemployment rate. From the period 2008-2012, while the employment rate growth was negative at -1.7%, the number of migrant workers entering Ontario increased by 32% (Ontario Federation of Labour 2013, 9). It is possible that employers are utilizing temporary foreign workers as a means of achieving lower labour costs, operation costs, and ultimately increased profitability in the private sector.

This may stem from the fact that the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is employer-driven in which the employer seeks out foreign workers to fill job vacancies. The employer may have to obtain an employment authorization called a Labour Market Opinion from Employment and Social Development Canada to complete a work permit application for temporary foreign workers (ESDC 2014). As part of this process, ESDC must ensure that the employer has taken all the necessary actions to hire Canadian workers so that foreigners are not displacing Canadians in the labour force (Fudge and MacPhail 2009, 9). However, it is questionable whether the time allowed before an employer can apply for a Labour Market Opinion is sufficient and reasonable such that a conclusion can be drawn that a suitable Canadian worker cannot be found to fill the vacancy. After a job posting for only seven days, an employer can apply to ESDC to recruit temporary foreign workers for the vacancy (Siemiatycki 2010, 62). This is a short period of time, thus providing only a small opportunity for Canadian workers to be hired for job postings before

employers turn towards temporary foreign workers.

The quickness in which employers are turning to temporary foreign workers to solve their labour needs raises the question of the reliance of employers on this form of labour. In the past, there was the prevalence of high skilled temporary foreign workers who were employed in the education, health, cultural and arts sectors (Foster 2012). Within the past ten years, there has been a shift in the type of temporary foreign workers being hired to include mostly low skilled workers. In 2010, there were 50,500 low skilled temporary foreign workers entering Canada which represented an increase of 74% from 2002 figures (CIC 2011). These low skilled workers are coming from lesser developed countries such as the Philippines, China, India and Mexico in contrast to developed countries of the past such as Australia, United States and United Kingdom (Foster 2012). Not only are the temporary foreign workers low skilled, but they are working mostly in four specific sectors. They are construction, retail trade, food service and accommodation, and warehousing/ transportation (Foster 2012). The persistent use of temporary foreign workers in these sectors raises the issue of whether employers are using the TFWP to satisfy their labour needs on an extended basis.

It is possible that the employer faces a dilemma. Here the dilemma is that the employer must decide whether to keep searching for suitable Canadian workers while the firms' operations are interrupted or to apply for a Labour Market Opinion (LMO) so that the vacancies can be filled quickly and with little interruption in business operations. Both choices have negative consequences; the first alternative would impact the firms' operations and bottom line whereas the second alternative would affect the domestic unemployment levels. So the dilemma forces a choice between business (employers) or society (public good). Some may argue that the decision has already been made informally. The increasing dependence on temporary foreign workers in Canada has been crucial in attaining labour flexibility and cost reductions (Siemiatycki 2010, 62). It may also be an indication of employers' decision to choose the bottom line in solving this dilemma. An unintended consequence of the employer choosing the bottom line is that temporary foreign workers are staying longer in Canada. There has been an increase in the number of temporary foreign workers transitioning into permanent residents. In 2010, 33,000 of them became permanent residents of Canada (CIC 2011).

The federal government has leaned on the side of the temporary foreign workers initiative. Cabinet ministers have openly expressed their approval of this "quicker fix" regime of

immigration in an effort to meet the employers' immediate needs for skilled workers (Siemiatycki 2010, 61). At present, the issue has been transformed into a public policy debate. Now the decision becomes whether to reduce the number of temporary foreign workers to save jobs for Canadian workers or to increase the number of temporary foreign workers to support employers' needs for skilled workers. From the federal government's side, there is continuous and consistent reiteration of the temporariness of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). Honourable Chris Alexander, Citizenship and Immigration Minister for Canada, has explicitly stated that the Temporary Foreign worker Program (TFWP) is intended to handle labour shortages on a temporary basis (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). This is contradictory just on the basis of sheer figures from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, from 2003-2012, a ten year period, the number of temporary foreign workers entering Canada more than doubled from 102,932 to 213,573 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2012, 75).

If the government intends the TFWP to really be temporary, then measures must be put in place so that Canadian workers can develop the needed skills to rejoin the employed workers. One possible solution to the current dilemma faced by the federal government is for skills training and development of human resources in Canada. Chris Smillie, senior adviser on government relations for the AFL-CIO Canada hopes that the federal government will make the connection between the utilization of the Temporary Foreign Worker program and the current Canadian training system (Goodman 2013a, 2013b). The ability of foreign workers to perform tasks which is apparently lacking within the human capital in Canada is the foundation on which a proper skills training program must be built. Chris Smillie suggests that efforts must be taken to ensure employers are investing in training programs for Canadian workers so that in the future there will be no use for temporary foreign workers (Goodman 2013a, 2013b). In an attempt to address this issue, the federal government, has decided to push for more training programs to boost domestic skills. The federal government's 2013 budget outlines a new initiative called the Canada Job Grant which invests \$15,000 per person so they can obtain training in demanded occupations (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). The estimation is that 130,000 Canadians per year would gain access to the skills training when the Canada Job grant is fully implemented (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). In the 2014 budget the federal government reaffirmed their commitment to skills training through the Canada Job Grant. According to Jim Flaherty, former Minister of Finance, the Canada Job Grant will better link training with job opportunities especially in sectors affected by skills mismatches and labour shortages (Janus 2014).

Other initiatives to encourage skills training include a digital skills development program in which \$60 million would be reallocated over a course of three years to stimulate enrolment in areas such as engineering, science and technology, and mathematics (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). It is projected that by 2016, Canada will be the need 106,000 Information technology workers, and by 2020, 95,000 engineers (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). The Canada Economic Action Plan 2013 also outlines projects to educate young adults on jobs in high demand fields through accessible labour market information in job banks and job alerts (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). This is of great importance because young people often face challenges in finding jobs and choosing careers. There is also the Youth Employment Strategy which aims to help young people to obtain the skills and work experience to transition into the labour force through program streams including summer work experience and skills link for aboriginal peoples (Service Canada 2014). Additionally, the federal government is targeting older workers as well through a special program that will assist older workers, age 54 to 64, living in communities with high unemployment rates with training so they can obtain new jobs (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). Employees lose jobs at all stages of their lives; however, older employees are usually the most disadvantaged in re-entering the workforce so this program can better support them.

Besides skills training, the federal government is focused on providing trainees with practical work experience. The Canada Economic Plan 2013 will allow for apprentices to receive a maximum of \$4000 in taxable grants once registered in a Red Seal program, a national certification for tradespersons in Canada (Government of Canada 2013a, 2013b). The plan is to aid about 26,000 apprentices annually (Janus 2014). Moreover, \$40 million has been budgeted to provide 3,000 internships in highly demanded areas (Janus 2014). This will support postgraduates' entrance into the workforce and create avenues for their future long term employment in fields where they are most needed for Canada's economic growth.

The current measures being employed by the federal government to handle the skills shortage in Canada can be successful in decreasing skill shortages in highly demanded skill areas in constructions, science, engineering and technology. However, there are still specific sectors which need skills development initiatives such as retail trade and tourism/hospitality to adequately address skill shortages. The Canadian Tourism Research Institute (CTHRC) estimates that labour demand will be greater than labour supply over the next 20 years resulting in labour shortages especially in food and beverage services and recreation



and entertainment services of the tourism industry (CTHRC 2012). There is still an urgent need for more collaboration between the government, industry associations and postsecondary institutions in identifying the industry related skills shortages and formulating programs to address them.

## **Conclusion: Future Direction and Challenges**

In thinking about the future, it is essential to reflect on the words of Minister Jason Kenney, responsible for employment and social development, “Canada is currently facing a paradox of too many Canadians without jobs in an economy of too many jobs without Canadians” (Goodman 2013a, 2013b). This statement provides the most accurate depiction of the dilemma faced by both the employer and the federal government.

One possible future action is that Canadian policymakers intensify their focus on the development of their own human resources. Direct collaboration with post secondary institutions is vital to designing specialized programs to close the skills gap in the labour force. Tailored programs in demanded fields would provide both the theoretical knowledge, practical skills and work experience to effectively transform the competencies of the labour force. This is a very long term sustainable human resource strategy. Added to that, provincial governments which have jurisdiction over education can subsidize tuition costs for students interested in pursuing fields that are in demand: a strategy that has been announced in Ontario (McQuillan 2013, 25). Financially, efforts can be made to increase interprovincial migration so that unemployed persons in provinces with high unemployment rates can move to provinces with labour shortages. Internal migration has been influential in lessening labour market imbalances in the past (McQuillan 2013, 20). Tax credits and subsidized housing can be given to those unemployed persons with the demanded skills especially those with families to support. Measures can be taken to reduce regional disparities in occupational standards and regulations for regulated profession so that it would be easier for professionals to gain employment in other provinces.

A major challenge that the federal government will face is that there is unlikely to be any significant decrease in the unemployment rate in Canada with the proposed initiatives. This is due to the fact that training in new skill areas is not an immediate solution, but a long term solution to the current labour shortage situation. According to Michael Atkinson, president of the Canada Construction Association, training in skilled trades in the construction sector can take as long as four years (Daily Commercial News 2013). Thus, there

will be the continued use of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program on a similar scale as it is presently for the next couple years until the unemployed workers can be trained, and then obtain practical experience either through apprenticeships or internships before they can enter the labour force as skilled workers. So unfortunately the current labour anomalies will remain.

A secondary challenge for the federal government will be to refocus the private sector which has already begun to rely on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program on a large scale to meet their labour needs. The private sector has been able to curtail costs and increase their bottom line by using temporary foreign workers, a cheaper source of labour. Until recently, employers were allowed to pay these foreign workers 15 per cent less than the standard wage for domestic workers (Goodman 2013a, 2013b). It may be difficult for the private sector to return to their profit levels once this labour shortage crisis is over. The federal government must be cognizant that the private sector may endeavor to prolong the use of temporary foreign workers on such grounds. All future labour policies must guarantee Canadian workers have the right skills to fill job vacancies.

The Canadian labour situation is indeed paradoxical. The prevalence of high unemployment figures in sectors where there are large numbers of unemployed persons to fill job vacancies exemplifies this point. From a provincial perspective, only in Saskatchewan and Alberta, labour supply cannot satisfy labour demands due to rapid economic growth of these provinces. Whilst in other provinces, especially in eastern Canada, there exists a labour surplus amidst cries of labour shortages. Interprovincial migration can assist, but not without the removal of current barriers. In turn, employers faced with a labour dilemma, are seeking out temporary foreign workers to fill job vacancies rather than searching domestically for a longer period of time to find Canadian workers who possess the needed skills for the job. Employers are concerned with the bottom line and are thus employing the use of TFWP as a means to curtail costs and achieve labour flexibility for the long term. The federal government is also faced with a dilemma – they have to either focus on human resource development of Canadian workers for the long term benefit of the country or they can continue to promote Canada's economic competitiveness by meeting labour demands through the TFWP. Yet, the federal government's actions appear to promote the TFWP so that Canada can achieve economic prosperity without placing sufficient emphasis on developing a strategic plan to address the labour shortages in all of the various sectors.

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