

# Attracting and Keeping Immigrant Labour

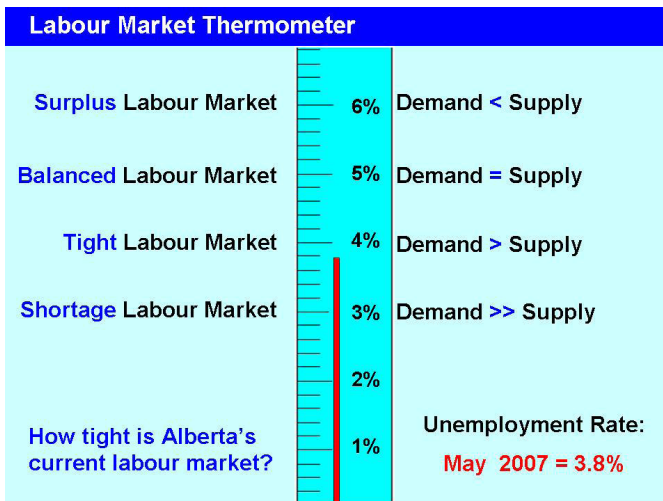
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## ■ Introduction

With the ever-increasing demand on labour in Alberta due to the “hot” economy and fewer people wanting to join the primary agriculture sector, this has created challenges to staffing requirements, both at a skilled and unskilled level. The unemployment rate across Canada is at an all time low of 6.1% with Alberta being the lowest at 3.8%. Once we get below 5% unemployment the demand out strips supply. (Alberta Employment and Immigration Industry, May 2007). **Figure 1** illustrates how the labour market reacts with demand and supply.

**Figure 1. Labour Market Thermometer.** *Source: Alberta Employment and Immigration Industry*



With the above illustration you can see the issue we were being faced with. Beginning in the fall of 2004 we have been faced with difficulties in hiring and retaining both skilled and unskilled workers. We decided that we needed to do something radically different to what we had done in the past. We had often talked about going to Mexico to recruit potential employees but that was as far as it got. We had now arrived at the point where we needed to put words into action.

In March of 2005 we hired the services of a person in San Diego to go to Mexico and conduct some interviews. He chose Guadalajara and secured 5 potential applicants. Now we started the process of obtaining LMO's (Labour market opinions) for the Mexican applicants to apply for work permits at the CIC office in Mexico City. This is the first part in recruiting foreign labour, obtaining an LMO from Service Canada. You send your information to Service Canada and they poll the market place to see if:

- There is a need for the type of worker you want to hire.
- You are paying them fairly and equivalent to a Canadian
- They meet the skill requirements. It is all assessed on the NOC (National Occupation code) matrix.

Once you have met the requirements and have received a positive confirmation this can then be sent to the applicant overseas. They in turn take/mail this with a job offer from the employer to the Canadian Embassy in their country to apply for a work permit.

This process had a few up's and down's as we found out. Some things you need to consider in hiring foreign workers are:

- Language requirements for processing officer in overseas Embassy
- Travel to/from Embassy
- Visa requirements to travel through other countries to Canada
- Travel to/from airports both ends

All in all, it took until October 2005 when the 5 Mexicans finally arrived in Alberta. This was our first taste of things to come. We thought that going through the hiring process was daunting enough, but settling the new employees was just as much work if not more. With new workers from a different culture and not speaking much English, came a few challenges to say the least.

Once arrived there is a myriad of things to deal with such as:

- Accommodation
- Bank accounts
- Social insurance number (SIN)
- Alberta Health Care Insurance (AHC)
- Mail
- Transportation
- Shopping and the list goes on.

As this was our first time in hiring foreign workers it was all new stumping ground for us. There was quite a bit of preparation that had to be done prior to arrival, such as accommodation with beds, bedding, cooking utensils etc.

## ■ Accommodation

We were fortunate enough to have a couple working for us that could speak Spanish, which was a great asset, as this couple became our “host” family. This really helped out in integrating them into our culture with the local amenities, grocery shopping etc. We also organized them to get to work each day because none of the employees had a Canadian drivers’ license and could not even drive one of our vehicles. It is really important that new foreign workers have a place to live where they feel welcome and the sense of a community. Because they are away from home, in a new country, with a new job, they need somewhere that they feel is home away from home.

## ■ Administration

SIN, AHC, banking and mail were first on the list post-arrival. Once we had orientated them at the office we took them to Calgary to get Social Insurance Numbers. This involved each individual providing passport and work permit at a Service Canada Employment center.

Alberta Health Care can be done by applying through the mail or going to the office, (in Calgary, 727 7th Ave SW,) and waiting in line. We are now visiting the office, as there appears to be a huge backlog with mail-in applications and some even getting lost! For AHC the applicant needs to provide proof of address, SIN with address on it, passport and their work permit.

A mailbox set-up requires the individual visiting the post office. This cannot be done ahead of time, as we found out, because the individual is required to do this in person.

Once this is all set up, the foreign worker can open a bank account. Again this is something that needs to be done in person. They will need their SIN and ID such as passport.

## ■ Drivers' License

Getting a license is one of the most important things to get for these workers because it provides more independence. For those that could speak English the option was to go to the local town and take a test. The ones who had more difficulty with the language had the option of going to Calgary and take their test with the aid of a translator, which they all opted for. If the foreign worker has held a drivers' license in his/her home country for a few years they can skip the graduated driver program. All they need is to provide a drivers' abstract and once they have passed the written and driven part they get a class 5 license. Also there are certain countries for which you can exchange the license to a Canadian license. Countries that you can do this with are: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland). Be careful with the International License. Foreign workers can only drive with a valid International Drivers' License if the insurance company allows. You need to check with them first. Also if a foreign worker does purchase and insure a vehicle using International License the premiums may be higher. For those who do wish to purchase and insure a car it will be beneficial to obtain a letter from their insurance company from their home country because this will help reduce the premiums.

Further acclimation into the community and Canada is an on-going process. Depending on the language skill of the foreign workers you may need to set-up for some ESL (English as Second Language) classes. We have done this and found it to be very successful. Once they get the basic principles they seem to be able to grasp more of the daily language in the workplace. Some have even gone on to take more ESL classes on their own time.

We are proud to note that some of our foreign workers who have been with us for a couple of years are now moving into Supervisory roles. They are even looking at staying for the long term, which takes us into a new game, Permanent Residency.

## ■ Permanent Residency

There are basically 2 routes to go for foreign workers to obtain PR status.

- Apply to Citizenship & Immigration Canada (CIC) as an individual or Family. Time frame approximately 2-6 years.
- Employer to sponsor the individual through the Provincial Nomination Program (PNP). Time frame approximately 6-18 months.

As an employer, we see it as our obligation to assist our employees with whatever we can to help them. For the ones that would like to stay permanently, we are now sponsoring them through the PNP. Currently they are all skilled livestock workers who want to start a life in Canada; some have a spouse and children at home that want to eventually come and live in Canada. There are 3 basic steps in this:

- Employer applies for an allocation.
- Employer identifies candidates.
- Individuals apply for nomination.

The initial application does take some effort and time, but once you have an allocation it is relatively simple to identify candidates. Once this is approved the candidate must apply for nomination. Once they receive their nomination they then apply to Citizenship & Immigration Canada for Permanent Residency.

## ■ Conclusion

Finding foreign workers now seems to be the easy part. We received referrals from current employees and a lot of resumes coming from the Philippines via e-mail. Correspondence via e-mail and a phone call seems to be working well. The work seems to start once they arrive!

The demand for foreign workers is going to increase over time because every industry in Alberta is short of employees. Now that we have more foreign workers coming into the industry, the biggest thing we must focus on is keeping them in this sector. Eventually, some of them will move around to other employers. While at first this may seem frustrating and disappointing, in the end the swine industry will benefit from filling the void of workers.

Foreign workers are not a quick or “easy fix” for labour shortages, as they require a greater effort by management. Not only do they require the same on-farm management as Canadian employees but also they come with all the

additional things noted above, which have additional costs associated with them. Labour challenges are not only going to continue for the foreseeable future but the cost associated with recruiting and retaining foreign workers is continuing to push up total labour cost on the farm.

It was definitely a challenge to start with, but the effort we put in has definitely been worthwhile. The foreign employees we currently have on staff are over 50% of total employees. They are from Mexico, Philippines, UK and Germany and they are worth their weight in gold. If it was not for them I'm not sure how we would have made it through these times of labour shortage.

## ■ Information Sources

Following are some website address that you may find useful if you are looking at attracting and/or keeping immigrant labour.

### *National Occupational Classification information*

<http://www23.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/2001/e/generic/matrix.pdf>

### *Service Canada – Labour Market Opinion information/forms*

[http://www1.servicecanada.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/foreign\\_workers/fwp\\_for\\_ms.shtml](http://www1.servicecanada.gc.ca/en/workplaceskills/foreign_workers/fwp_for_ms.shtml)

### *Work permit info from Citizenship and Immigration Canada*

<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/work/index.asp>

### *Alberta Pork Foreign worker information*

<http://www.albertapork.com/industry.aspx?NavigationID=2039>

### *Driver license information*

[www.servicealberta.gov.ab.ca/mv/operator.cfm](http://www.servicealberta.gov.ab.ca/mv/operator.cfm)

### *Alberta Provincial Nominee Program web site*

[www.alberta-canada.com/pnp](http://www.alberta-canada.com/pnp)