



Can't find help? Look at home.

New labour prospects could be hoping for a second chance ... and living next door.

Canada's wood industry is in desperate need of skilled workers, and has been for a long time. Jim is a skilled worker looking for work in Canada's wood industry. He is trained, loves working with wood, and would love nothing more than to do it for a living. But nobody will hire Jim. It's not because he's too old. It's not because he's a bad worker. It's because he's living in a halfway house and has a criminal record.

Indeed, many of you would probably never dream of hiring Jim in one of your shops. That he lives in a halfway house, where participants make the transition from

prison or treatment to life on the outside, is enough to scare away most members of the community, as well as employers. However, Jim isn't really a threat, and giving him a job might not only be the best thing for him, but for wood-sector employers across Canada.

"Jim" isn't his real name, but he fits the profile of a real person described by Stacey Dort, director of community corrections for Shelter Nova Scotia in Halifax. "He was eventually forced to go into disability because nobody would hire him," she says. "It's so unfortunate. I think everybody loses."



Proud to produce: The faces of LakeCity Woodworkers.

What correctional-sector workers such as Dort are quick to point out is that a worker hired from a halfway house, or other correctional facility, undergoes far more scrutiny than someone hired from the street. She says, “What people don’t realize is that participants in our programs receive extensive rehabilitation and screening. You know exactly what you’re getting with our people. They are ready to work and be productive.”

The purpose of a halfway house is to reintegrate former prisoners or addicts into the outside world. To that end, such facilities provide participants with extensive skills training, addictions or mental-health therapy, and any other necessary counselling. Our tax dollars are being used to prepare these people for life in the community. Yet too few people are willing to reap the benefits of such investments.

The fear factor, so to speak, remains formidable. Potential employers are afraid that a hire from a halfway house is prone to theft, violence or other criminal acts. Dort is adamant that the process is set up to succeed. The last thing anyone wants is for incidents to occur, and to have these programs fail.

According to Dort, “We go to great lengths to ensure that the right people are hired for the right employer. We screen, and we match. We even screen the employer, in a sense, to make sure he or she is ready to hire someone in our program. We do regular checks. Participants have to regularly check in. But none of this interferes with the job. It’s as though they’re just like any other worker.”

It’s not just those with a criminal or addicted past that can serve as an alternative labour pool for Canada’s wood industry. LakeCity Woodworkers is a producer of handcrafted solid-wood furnishings in Dartmouth, N.S.

It looks just like countless other wood shops across Canada. The facility produces beds, tables, wine racks — you name it. There’s only one thing that makes it different: the workers suffer from mental illness.

Chris Fyles, executive director of LakeCity, explains the premise of the operation. “We’re essentially meeting various needs within our community,” he says. “On the one hand, we’re providing meaningful employment to those that are capable of doing the work. On the other hand, we’re a fully operational business that sells high-quality goods to the market.”

What such an operation as LakeCity has done is to integrate a social need with an economic one. In essence, it’s a social program that also serves as an employer and a provider of goods and services. LakeCity also serves as an example of what can be done with an under-utilized source of labour. Fyles says, “I think we’re showing the world what the human spirit is capable of.”

Indeed, there is no shortage of supply when it comes to people looking to change their lives for the better. Across Canada, there are rehab centres, addiction facilities, youth programs — and countless other social agencies — filled with potential workers that are more than eager to serve as productive members of society.

As unconventional as some of these pools of labour might seem, the reality is that the *status quo* is currently not working. All levels of government and educational institutions have tried more traditional solutions to fill the so-called skills gap. Money goes to schools, programs, apprenticeships, and so on, but job openings in wood shops across Canada still go unfilled.

Also in the news recently is the ongoing controversy surrounding the temporary foreign-worker program. The





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reality is, until there are more Canadians willing to work in the trades, there will be a demand for labour from abroad. In fact, there will be a demand for skilled labour, period. So, Canadians, including employers, worried about giving jobs to foreigners might want to think more creatively about where they find workers on the domestic front.

This is not a new problem in Canada's wood industry. In fact, it's a state of affairs that, as a sector, we might have to come to terms with. Let's face it. The pay is not great. The working conditions can be dark, dusty and unpleasant. Most workers, even from top educational pro-

grams, have to start at the bottom. People are simply not lining up to work in Canada's wood industry.

If that's the case, then other solutions might be necessary. Those other solutions might include people looking at a second chance at life. Instead of waiting for the fresh-faced wood-industry graduate that would rather design video games for a living, why not the reformed drug addict that will sweep the floors without a second thought? Instead of having to tap a foreign-worker program for skilled work, why not a Canadian from a correctional program that's already been trained for the job?

For Fyles, there is a stigma surrounding the hiring of certain people within society, but that stigma works both ways. "So, on the one hand, there are employers out there that are prejudiced, for lack of a better term," he says. "However, the stigma often exists on the inside of those with mental illness and others. They often think they're not wanted, or not good enough. Our program proves otherwise."

The LakeCity program is not the only employer to utilize an untapped pool of labour. Fyles points to a progressive employer in Toronto, Ont. that serves as an inspiration. Fyles says, "Mark Wafer owns a number of Tim Hortons franchises, and he makes it a point to hire people with disabilities. So, it's not just about being a good person, it's about being a good business, too."



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According to statistics, anywhere from half to two-thirds of people with disabilities in Canada are unemployed. Yet, as with reformed prisoners and people with mental illness, there are advantages to hiring the disabled. Compared to the rest of the population, they are more likely to have skills training, their disabilities often force them to solve problems creatively, and they are motivated. That's not always the case with an average graduate from college or university.

According to Dort, sometimes the problem is simply one of matching willing employers with capable workers. "It's been our experience that there are companies out there that want to help. In my opinion, there aren't enough of them, but they're there," she says. "Sometimes all they need is to be pointed in the right direction; to take that first step into the unknown."

Dort says one of those first steps might be with COR-CAN, a rehabilitation program provided by the Canadian government that provides partnerships with businesses to train and employ prisoners and those released from prisons. The organization produces a catalogue of goods manufactured with the help of its participants. Products include various forms of furniture and cabinetry — all delivered and installed with after-sales service.

For Fyles, it's real simple. He says, "Find a local association, institution — whatever — and just start talking

with them. Develop relationships. Get your questions answered. The fact is that, if you want help, you can get it, and it's not real hard."

Clarissa Johnson is manager for the Edmonton John Howard Society, an organization that manages halfway houses and at-risk youth in Edmonton, Alta. For Johnson, the resistance associated with hiring people from alternative labour pools is strong, as are attitudes about most people in her organization's programs. "That's why we go to great lengths to be as open with the community as we can be. Anybody who wants to visit us can do so. We have absolutely nothing to hide," Johnson says. "There is a lot of misinformation about what halfway houses are about, and who lives in them, for example. It's our job to reintegrate people into society, and that's what our participants want, too. Ideally, it should be a win-win for all."

Jobs should be a win-win for both the employer, who needs skilled help, and the employee, who wants to make a living. Yet, right now, this isn't happening enough in Canada's wood industry. To be more productive, wood shops have to look elsewhere for solutions. Even if it's not the first place you would think of, these alternative pools of labour still might be the right place to hire help — for everyone involved. All you have to do is Google rehabilitation or treatment in your area.

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