

Training game everyone can win

Vacant jobs, high unemployment in oil industry's backyard: ADLC and NLSD pilot a solution

By Frank McCallum

Resource employers struggling to fill entry-level, grow-on-the-job, “blue-collar” positions understand Canada’s employment paradox better than anyone.

Unemployment and dropout rates are high in many of the areas they operate. The inescapable logic of this is that many young school leavers need an alternative to professional or ticketed-trade career paths just as badly as industry needs applicants for the very jobs they could thrive doing.

In such a scenario, what do both students and employers need from the education system?

Well first, potential candidates must know the opportunities exist, that they are perfectly capable of

seizing them, and that these positions can be the start of a fulfilling career for employees who take advantage of opportunities for advancement.

Second, those candidates should know as much as possible about the work before they start – both to increase immediate productivity by shortening learning curves, and to reduce the number who will realize the job is a bad fit and quit after only a few months on the job.

And third, employers need to reduce the cost and disruption of injuries by instilling knowledge and a culture of safety *before* lessons start being learned the hard way.



ADLC's Frank McCallum works on Energy Education 35 with Plamondon School student Shayla Ludington



The student's simulation character reaches to grasp a service-rig tool for handling pipe.

In conjunction with Northern Lights School Division (NLSD), Alberta Distance Learning Centre (ADLC) has come up with a new education model designed to meet precisely these needs, and to do so in a way that appeals to youth for whom traditional core-subject high-school learning doesn't seem relevant or motivating.

This model is based on the ability of a computer simulation to reinforce what has been taught in theory, the way a flight or driving simulator accomplishes what handbooks and classrooms can never do on their own. It recognizes that while all of us are experiential learners to some extent, that path is especially effective for members of groups such as rural and Aboriginal youth that tend to be under-represented in higher education.

A pilot of the concept is currently being conducted at three NLSD schools and if the experience and reactions of the first students taking Energy Education 35 are anything to go by, many other occupations and industries – from agriculture to forestry – may see opportunities to help themselves as well. The initiative is key to ADLC's goal of supporting Alberta school divisions, leveraging their provincial connections and expertise to help bring new and innovative learning experiences to rural and remote learners throughout the province.

While the simulation – a first-person, avatar-style interface familiar to millions of computer gamers – may in part serve as an incentive for students to complete the preliminary work, its real value is its ability to let students actually experience what has been taught. The simulation, developed by an Alberta company called Coole Immersive, is a training tool developed for the real world; it is all business and doesn't make things easy or cut slack for teenaged students. ADLC adapted the simulation and created an online credited Alberta course to support its use and deployment. By the end stages, it is both highly detailed and demanding, requiring students to complete their cycle of tasks flawlessly three times to pass the five-credit course. One rig manager has said that using new workers trained on Coole Immersive's simulation is like hiring people with the safety skills that come with six months' experience.

We live in an era that gives most of the attention in our education system and on both sides of the employment equation to those who follow paths to professional degrees or tickets. Lower oil prices and reduced activity in Alberta's oil patch in recent months further darken the picture that outsiders see about prospects for positions a young Albertan can walk into with only a work ethic and a high-school diploma. But a good many such positions will be available going forward, especially with recent changes to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.

This fall ADLC has continued its pilot in Bonnyville with a new group of students. Teachers there already have a few who might profit from and be interested in it. In addition, First Nations schools in the Kainai Board of Education near Lethbridge and in Fort McKay, north of Fort McMurray, are being added to a second round of piloting, and Energy Education 35 is being added to the catalog of courses adult learners can access to upgrade their education and employability.

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