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Creating a High-Performing Labour Market in Ontario

Interview with Tom Zizys, author of Working Better

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Francine Buchner

Something has changed in Ontario's labour market over the last 30 years and not necessarily for the better, eludes a recently released report by Tom Zizys titled, Working Better: Creating a High-Performing Labour Market in Ontario.

"It seems to me a lot of people are complaining about the situation. There's something weird when everyone is saying there is a problem," said Zizys who has worked for almost 20 years as a policy researcher and project consultant in the community sector, focusing on labour market analysis and designing employment programs.

A symptom of the problem is we have employers using computer programmes to sift through cover letters and resumes, said Zizys. Employers are seeking just-in-time talent in a competitive workplace, rather than grooming their own employees for promotion, causing a "mismatch" - overqualified persons in entry-level jobs and vice-versa.

The 1980s saw big lay offs and a change in consumer mentality from paying the high prices for a quality product to buying the cheapest product. And over the periods of 1991 and 2006 Ontario's jobs has changed to resemble an hourglass, with the prominent concentrations of jobs - knowledge workers and entry-level jobs - at the two ends of the spectrum and the middle jobs shrinking. These middle jobs typically do not need a post secondary degree but do require some skill, usually acquired through several years of work or through an apprenticeship.

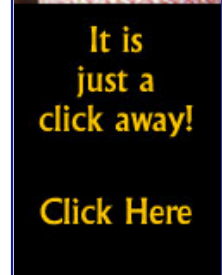
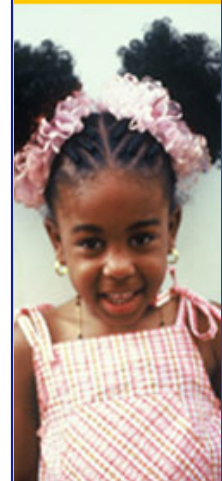
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Zizys refers to this transformation in his report as the labour market "perfect storm," where technological change; globalization with its "pinch of competition" being felt from overseas; the rise of "impatient" capital with investments evaluated less on security (long-term equity growth) and more on immediate returns; cultural shifts and the offshoring of jobs that has doubled the number of workers in the industrialised world's labour pool, all factor into the current labour market situation.

"We fell into it over a course of 30 years because we were told we had to cut costs," said Zizys. Explaining that suddenly, those company president's that were congratulated for being able to hire are now, being congratulated for being able to "make those tough decisions." Zizys suggests that perhaps Ontario's lens is blurred regarding what is really needed to work better to create a high-performing labour market. The United States of America and Germany are engaging in workforce investment boards, where there is a more consultative approach taken versus a combative one - eliminating the antagonist relationship between labour and management.

The report states that Ontario's employment services put people into a job that "fits," but Zizys said that is no longer good enough, we need to put a focus on workforce development and career-building. Once upon a time some of those entry-level employees could work themselves up the ladder and into the president's chair. Zizys believes that it is critical that Ontario's labour market focus on the individual.

The Ontario government would be in a good position to bring to the table the employers, workers, community colleges and employment agencies to begin the proposed strategic overhaul to working better: creating a high-performing labour market in Ontario, said Zizys. "It all starts with awareness," which inspired him wrote the report.



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