

B.C. labour market tightens for professionals; HUMAN RESOURCES | Rising demand, limited talent pool and cost of living challenge recruiting



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The province's labour market for B.C. doctors, accountants, notaries and other professions will likely remain tight for the foreseeable future, especially with Metro Vancouver's high cost of living making it hard to attract candidates from other jurisdictions.

That's the assessment of several industry associations representing different groups of professionals in the province, who note that many fields also have a limited number of graduates entering the market to replace retirees. When combined with rising demand for professional services from a growing population, the result is a challenging hiring environment.

"We did a survey of our members back in the summer, and at that time, 73% reported experiencing recruitment challenges," said Lori Mathison, president and CEO of the Chartered Professional Accountants of BC (CPABC). "As a consequence, we are finding that employers, whether they be accounting firms, large organizations, non-profit or government, have to become very creative in order to find the talent that they need."

B.C.'s family doctors and notaries face similar labour-supply pressure.

BC Notaries CEO Jacqui Mendes said her industry requires prospective notaries to complete an 18-month master of arts degree in applied legal studies at Simon Fraser University, the only school in B.C. that offers the program. Graduates would then need to go through six weeks of practical training with the Society of Notaries Public of BC, and the entire program has a limited annual intake of 35 students.

"I would say the short answer is no," Mendes said when asked if enough new notaries are entering the B.C. market to offset attrition. "While we have new notaries entering the field every year, we have notaries who are retiring or ceasing to practise. And we are limited in the number of notaries we can educate every year.... So the society can have a huge number of applications, but there are only 35 spots each year. Now, the society

is looking at other opportunities with other schools, but that takes time.”

There are 384 practising notaries registered in B.C., and Mendes said many towns in regions like the Kootenays don’t have their own notary public office.

The case is similarly dire for family doctors, said Doctors of BC president Eric Cadesky. As patient demand rises and a growing number of practising doctors start to consider retirement, the lack of new, locally trained doctors coming into the field is more acutely felt by everyone.

Cadesky said as many as a third of family doctors in Vancouver are planning to retire within the next few years.

“We’re starting to see the echo after the boom that was the big cut in medical student training that happened a few decades ago, and we haven’t fully caught up to that,” Cadesky said. “We’re only training about 288 family doctors each year, and the numbers show we need at least 450, so we’re in a deficit … and we are beginning to see very high rates of burnout because there are increasing burdens taking us away from our patients. So every time I have to fill out a form for an insurance company, that’s time that has been taken away from me seeing patients who need help.”

In the case of accountants, CPABC’s Mathison said British Columbia’s Labour Market Outlook for 2018 projects the number of job openings over the next 10 years in business and finance administration at over 150,000 people, demonstrating the macro trend of labour demand in that field.

“Narrowing that down to the finance and accounting in particular, recognizing that CPAs go into general and also more technical roles, we are seeing about 32,000 projected job openings in finance and accounting during that period,” Mathison said. “So we are planning to make sure that we are bringing on more members to meet that need.... We do have a target of adding at least 1,000 CPAs [in B.C.] a year to be able to meet that demand, and over the last three years, we’ve had an average of 1,100 CPA students who have graduated.”

But she added that employers recognize it isn’t enough to rely on local talent, and many have begun to import candidates from other jurisdictions that have existing credential-recognition agreements with B.C. That’s where the Lower Mainland’s cost of living high home prices and other factors have deterred some from moving here to take jobs.

Doctors of BC’s Cadesky said while programs like Health Match BC are helping to recruit healthcare practitioners to areas where services are needed, the challenges of offsetting a new candidate’s living-cost concerns are very real, especially in the province’s biggest urban areas.

“Programs like Health Match try to help match doctors with the areas in need, and those areas do include Victoria and Vancouver because the cost of doing business and the

cost of living are becoming more and more difficult to recruit doctors to those regions,” he said, adding that when it comes to doctors, there’s also an ethical consideration.

“It’s difficult to take doctors from one community to another because of the effect it has on the other community where the doctor was originally practising.”

Jacqollyne Keath, president of Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia, said some health authorities in B.C. have been creative in offering items such as paying for a new nurse’s moving costs - but only if the health authorities have the budgets to do so. In many cases, such as the rural areas with the most dire needs, the local health authorities do not have such resources to entice professionals to move there. Keath said it is something of a chicken-and-egg conundrum.

The compensation isn’t often there to entice enough new professionals to an area of need, and that shortfall has raised work stress to levels that are not only pushing people out of their fields, but also repelling potential new candidates. She noted the ongoing debate around a tentative, three-year contract between the province and the BC Nurses’ Union, which has drawn criticism because it provides bonuses for nurses working on short-staffed units but lacks a guarantee that more nurses will be hired to deal with staff shortages. “Up until the end of last year, I was teaching and in the clinical situation, and I’ve noticed a steady increase in what the nurse-to-patient count is,” she said. “

What might have been at one time a one-to-four ratio is now one-to-six or one-to-seven, and the acuity [the intensity of care required by one patient] has increased. So yes, nurses are stressed, and it leads to burnout ... and with the declining number of new graduate nurses, the numbers just can’t match.” In the area of health care, both Keath and Cadesky agree that a more fundamental rethink of the system is required to address the pressures felt by professionals. Another solution, they say, is for a clearer vision of how different professional designations can work together and delegate tasks, so that the efficiency of the existing workforce can be maximized.

As for professions like accountants and notaries, officials say a key factor will be the incorporation of new technology, such as artificial intelligence and online financial services, to reduce demand on individual professionals without having the new tech render human services obsolete. “We keep an eye on demographic trends, and that relates to technology,” BC Notaries’ Mendes said. “A lot of people are now doing their wills themselves; how effective is that? And how can we insert ourselves into some of those electronic processes?... We’re keeping an eye on how that’s evolving.”