

Making Students Work for You: Saskatchewan's Mining Industry Partners with Educators to Create Industry-Specific Training

By Meg Crane

The Saskatchewan Mining Association estimates that between 13,000 and 15,000 new employees will be needed in the mining industry in the province within the next decade. The creation of new positions and retiring employees mean there is going to be a huge demand for workers. And Saskatchewan educational institutions, in collaboration with the industry and provincial government, are already helping to fill that void by creating programs to get young people ready for the industry.

International Minerals Innovation Institute (IMII) is encouraging post-secondary institutions in the province to train students for the mining industry. IMII, a partnership between six major mining companies and the provincial government, funds programs at colleges and universities to get students into the industry.

"The objective of IMII is to increase the capacity in the province for education and training, and research and development for the industry," said Engin Özberk, IMII executive director and senior technical advisor. According to Özberk, in the past year, eight projects have been approved. IMII is now in the process of settling agreements with the institutions whose proposals were approved so they can provide funding.

But will encouraging post-secondary institutions to create these programs actually fill the void? Özberk said they can't be sure. "We are putting in all these efforts and we don't have good numbers yet." All the approved programs come with an impact assessment, including how many students will be expected to graduate annually. Once those are released (near the end of the year) there should be a better idea of how many students will be graduating with training in the industry.

Özberk points out, though, that they can't force all the students to stay in the mining industry. And even those who do



A coal mining loader.

might leave the province. "We have to, as a province and as an industry, keep a certain edge over the competition," said Özberk. The industry needs to find a way to keep graduating students in the province. "And that's another challenge."

The Mining Industry Business Specialist program at Saskatoon Business College (SBC) is specifically targeted toward the over 60 companies in the Saskatchewan mining supply chain, which means students are more likely to stay in the province. "We don't necessarily target the large, international companies," said campus director Blair Chapman. The over 40 students who have gone through the 12 month program took all business administration courses, plus eight classes specific to the industry, including Mining Industry Terminology; Mining Industry Law, Regulations and Policies; and Mining Industry Transport and Logistics.

A majority of graduates from the program have stayed in the industry and started their careers in Saskatchewan, said Chapman. At the end of each graduating year he gathers all students'

resumes, binds them with information about the curriculum and sends the booklets to employers throughout the province.

SBC principal Beth Shewkenek said companies who have hired graduates from the program have come back requesting more to fill vacant positions. She said part of the reason is that their students take less time to train than others would. Their niche knowledge, including knowing terminology of the industry, means employers spend less money on training.

Chapman said a student who recently graduated came back to visit and expressed how happy he was with his education. "He's thrilled that he's starting with a wage comparable to what any commerce graduate would receive," said Chapman. With plans to expand the program so that it's available online, SBC is helping prevent the crisis that could arise if thousands of new workers aren't entering the mining industry.

Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) trains

students in the field and has them walking out with a Mining Engineering Technology diploma. Jamie Hilts, dean of technology, said they saw the first graduates of the program this May; it was started in 2011. Between 25 and 30 students enter the program each year, with about 15 to 18 expected to graduate.

Hilts said that even before graduating, some students had jobs lined up. "The biggest thing is the program has been designed with an enormous amount of input from the industry," said Hilts. The students are being tailored to employers' needs. They learn about geology, surveying, drafting, underground GIS, safety, ventilation, site prep, mining practices, materials handling, and more. Most of the learning is done in the classroom and labs.

"We also then have opportunities for people to go out into field camps," said Hilts. Besides this program, SIAST has others that have components related to mining.

"These programs are critical in helping to address the shortage of talent in the future," said Marshall Hamilton, vice-president of human resources for The Mosaic Company. Mosaic has already hired people straight out



The Team Charter Signing between SIAST, IMII and Northlands College.

of mining programs in Saskatchewan for its potash operations in the province.


According to Hamilton, one of the biggest difficulties of losing employees to retirement is transferring their knowledge to new workers coming in. The new programs in the province are alleviating the situation. "The programs offered in Saskatchewan are second to none; students are ready and prepared to begin their career with the training they receive," said Hamilton.

Some programs include a work experience component. This helps students get a better feel for what the workplace is like and gives them more hands-on training. Having the programs in Saskatchewan also addresses the problem of people leaving.


"By offering these programs in Saskatchewan, people are staying in the province to get their education and it encourages them to work and live in the province; there are great opportunities for people to put their training to work," said Hamilton.

As the mining industry in Saskatchewan grows and employees leave, employers won't need to worry about finding motivated, intelligent and well-trained young people to bring into the industry. This is all thanks to the collaboration between the industry, provincial government and the educational institutions that have the foresight to see what is going to happen and have already put plans into action to deal with the potential problem. **M**


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