

RECRUITMENT

Attracting the right talent

Amazon's consideration of Canada highlights need for skilled ICT professionals

By Stephen Cryne and Martin Hrobsky

Canada's position as a world-class hub for information and communication technology (ICT) has been validated with the recent announcement by Sidewalk Labs, a division of Alphabet (a.k.a. Google), to invest in Toronto. Facebook recently announced the opening of an artificial intelligence lab in Montreal. The Vancouver region boasts the likes of Shopify and Microsoft, and Southern Ontario is often referred to as Canada's Silicon Valley, home to BlackBerry and many of the countries fastest-growing startup firms.

These are all big deals. Canada beat hundreds of cities across the world to be selected for these investments, and proves that it can attract the largest international players in the fields of technology and artificial intelligence.

Over the past few months, cities across North America have been making a pitch for the location of Amazon's HQ2, which is estimated to employ 50,000 people directly (and many more indirectly through other jobs).

Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto were top Canadian contenders — with support from all three levels of government — and in January, Amazon announced Toronto had made the short list.

Regardless of whether or not Toronto wins the Amazon bid, significant effort needs to be made in developing the ICT industry and meeting increased employment demands in this sector over the next decade, if Canada is to become a global leader in the new economy.

The reality is that today we simply don't have the homegrown talent

available to accommodate the move of a company the size of Amazon, without seriously jeopardizing other ICT firms and related industries.

There are about 811,200 information communication and technology professionals currently employed in Canada, but provinces across the country will require an additional 182,000 ICT workers by 2019, according to a study published by the Information and Communications Technology Council of Canada in 2016.

Considering the unemployment rate in this sector is hovering at less than three per cent — well below the current national rate of unemployment (5.7 per cent) — this will be a significant headwind to growth.

Toronto should be attractive as a destination for global ICT business for two key reasons, according to Ed Clark, former CEO of TD Bank and business adviser to Ontario's premier, speaking to the Business News Network in October.

One, the Ontario government (not unlike other provincial governments) is investing in increasing the number of STEM graduates and, two, Canada's ability to attract international talent because of our inclusive society and welcoming approach to immigration.

Clark's second point is essential to sustain and build Canada's ICT sector. Irrespective of whether or not Amazon chooses Canada for the location of its new headquarters, growth in the sector will not be possible without looking outside our borders for international talent.

Recently, Ipsos and the Canadian Employee Relocation Council (CERC) conducted a comprehensive study of more than 10,000 em-

ployees in 20 countries about their willingness to relocate for work.

Our research found that attracting those highly skilled workers, including employees in the ICT sector, is more difficult than it was five years ago.

The fact is, for many global employees the increasingly complicated political, social and economic realities of the world today are making them more reluctant and less willing to consider relocating for work.

However, the same economic, social and economic complications that are softening this desire are realities that Canada has not faced.

In fact, these are areas of great strength when it comes to our country's ability to attract the best and the brightest from around the globe.

Compared to five years ago, the proportion of those who express a desire to relocate to Canada has actually increased, which is in contrast to trends observed in other countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and across the globe more generally.

Canada is increasingly viewed as a top destination for relocation among global employees willing to make the move to another country, including those in the ICT sector.

Canada is now the second destination of choice for employees in this sector, trailing only the United States, which has declined as a destination of choice.

Canada's strong position as a destination for skilled workers can be directly attributed to our unique status as a country that has a strong and stable economy, a progressive society, and policies that are attractive to international workers.

Looking specifically at global employees who work in the ICT sector, the overwhelming majority would only relocate to a country that has exactly what Canada already has: a high-quality and accessible health-care system (82 per cent); friendliness to immigrants (80 per cent); a good social security system (80 per cent); a high-quality and accessible education system (74 per cent); and an innovative economy (73 per cent).

The research shows that those factors — the most important factors to global employees when deciding whether to relocate for work — play to Canada's advantage.

Global employers need to know that not only does Canada have a strong pool of homegrown talent, it's also well-positioned to attract the best and the brightest international talent needed for business growth.

Canada also has a great opportunity to promote the country to skilled workers around the world who want to be a part of a growing and innovating economy, regardless of whether or not Amazon chooses Canada.

This is unique opportunity and one we can ill afford to miss. For that reason, governments at all levels must continue to work with the business community to identify growing skills gaps and, in addition to investing in developing homegrown talent, expand policy levers in immigration systems and the temporary foreign worker programs to address those gaps.

Both in Toronto, Martin Hrobsky is a vice-president at Ipsos Public Affairs, and Stephen Cryne is president and CEO of the Canadian Employee Relocation Council.