BOOMING ECONOMIES, RISING COMMODITY PRICES, UNPRECEDENTED UNEMPLOYMENT RATES. WHAT MORE COULD CANADA'S WESTERN PROVINCES ASK FOR? MAYBE MORE WORKERS.

Last month, I had the fortune of attending a conference in Vancouver, one of my favourite cities. As usual, I made a point of taking a walk through Stanley Park. As I strolled along the sea-wall overlooking Vancouver’s impressive skyline, I was struck by the number of construction cranes that have sprouted up amidst the glass towers, as the city prepares for the 2010 Winter Olympics. The scene left no doubt that Vancouver is thriving.

The story is similar about 1,000 kilometres to the east, in Canada’s economic powerhouse, where rising oil prices continue to drive Alberta’s economy. The province led the country in GDP growth for the third consecutive year in 2006, coming in at more than double the national average.

But the prosperity isn’t limited to B.C. and Alberta. A recent headline in the Globe and Mail announced that Saskatchewan’s largest city is undergoing a “Saskaboom,” with uranium, potash, oil and gas, and wheat prices fuelling the economy. And The Conference Board of Canada reported last month that Saskatoon is on pace to have the country’s fastest growing economy this year—yes, even ahead of Calgary. Further east, in Manitoba, economic output is growing at a rate above the Canadian average, spurred on by ideal growing conditions for canola and wheat.

So it’s not surprising that unemployment rates in the four Western provinces are the lowest in the country—ranging from 3.5% in Alberta to 4.9% in Saskatchewan. In a labour market that tight, employers need to look for new ways to attract people—people to design and put up the buildings, people to extract and refine the oil, people to process and sell the canola, and people to do the paperwork and ink the deals.

For our annual Report on Western Canada, beginning on page 12, pension and benefits experts from the region look at what employers can do—and are doing—to attract and retain the people they need. We’ve also profiled plan sponsors that have made serious changes to their pension and benefits offerings to keep their existing employees and win over prospective ones.

As employers in Canada’s Western provinces vie for the attention of the limited pool of workers, they’re going to have to get more and more innovative when designing and communicating their compensation offerings. Employers in the rest of Canada should take note—some of the best ideas for winning the war for talent will be coming from the West.

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