

ASKING FOR TROUBLE

By John Risley



The four provincial Atlantic economies are in a perilous state. The long-identified reasons as to why this is the case (no population growth, aging population, mediocre P to 12 education system, stressed health care structure, bloated public service) are exacerbated by the precipitous decline in oil prices. Not only has it had a devastating effect on Newfoundland and Labrador's revenue base, but the lay-offs in Alberta and Saskatchewan have returned scores of Atlantic Canadians back home. Unfortunately, it looks as if it will be some time before energy prices have recovered to the point (stability at higher prices is what is really required) where these or any jobs will come back. Furthermore, it is highly likely the world has and will have changed to the point where it will never be like it was.

Our region really has to take stock of what it wants. We can have some of the most rigorous regulatory standards in the world for managing our energy resources. We can ban fracking of gas. We can continue to believe the world will come back to us and just wait for the moment when it will once again ask for our people skills and access to our resources. But here's the problem: we can't afford to wait.

What a company needed 100 people to do last year, it will only need 50 to do in five years. This isn't corporate greed – it is economic reality. Our companies have to compete and to do so they have to become more efficient. Computers will do more and robots will take over both mundane and technically challenging repetitive tasks and processes.

As global demand for oil continues to climb, albeit cautiously, there will be a whole herd of jurisdictions anxious and capable of responding. Capital and demand will go to those countries offering the best return, the most stability, the least risk, regulatory, political and otherwise. Here is my point: Canada and Newfoundland, Nova Scotia or New Brunswick can each have our own set of rules, but those rules will be judged by others, not us, and it may well be that their judgment is not favorable to us.

In the same way that we need to compare the costs of doing business locally with other areas competing for the same investment dollars, so too do our human resources need to undertake the same calibration. A job lost needs to be viewed as an opportunity for

skills improvement or taking education to a higher standard. The good news is that the online world has delivered up a whole host of very reasonably priced (in some cases, free) opportunities to do just that. Almost every skill set imaginable can be improved upon through an online experience. For the folks so inclined, regardless of age or gender, career changes and upgraded technical classifications are a viable possibility.

At the risk of getting myself into real trouble, the work ethic of the so-called millennial segment of our population is deficient (I thought long and hard in choosing that description). Look, it's great to be able to head out the door at four o'clock. I like to go to the gym too. But the point is that employers can replace that person with someone outside Atlantic Canada who puts greater weight on their work responsibility. This isn't an idle comment of my own – it's an observation shared by many other employers in the region.

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One of the terrific bright lights in our economy is the emergence of so many startups. But I sense a lack of urgency in our startup community. They don't understand that good ideas or technologies can't be developed at your pace – they have to be developed at a "global" pace. Literally, we have no time to lose.

Sure, we can set everything up to have it our way, but understand it may not be what the world values. Get what you wish for and you may well be left behind.

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FEEDBACK

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